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Culture, Morality and Rights: Or, Should Alasdair MacIntyre's Philosophical Driving License Be Suspended?

"Those who cannot be enthusiastic in the study of society as it is, would not be so in the study of a better society if they had it. Here or nowhere is your America."

Bernard Bosanquet

Abstract: Taken at face value, Professor MacIntyre's charge that modern culture is "emotivist" is conceptually incoherent and betrays epistemological confusion. Examination of the modern concept and practice of rights indicates that his comparisons between modern and pre-modern cultures exaggerate the irrationality, individualism, and fragmentation of the former, the rationalism, unity, and communalism of the latter. There are important differences among the several cultural forms that MacIntyre distinguishes. It is less clear that, lacking (as he admittedly does) a satisfactory account of moral reasoning, MacIntyre has made persuasive his case for abandoning modern liberalism in favor of communalisms inspired by pre-modern cultures.

Privatized, atomized, anomic; impersonal, faceless, homeless; amoral, instrumental, manipulative; divided, conflictful, destructive. Intellectuals' nostalgia for the imagined and wished for communal relationships of some past time have hurled all of these charges at modern liberal societies. Reflecting his (perhaps regretted?) involvement in technical analytic philosophy, in the most disconcerting passages of *After Virtue* (AV) Alasdair MacIntyre deepens and radicalizes these complaints by asserting that modern culture is "emotivist". Heir to differentiated and complex but (once) rich and integrating traditions of moral and political thought and practice, modern culture is said by him to have reduced this legacy to a fragmented and incoherent collection of concepts and categories, attitudes and assumptions that are little more than disguises for personal or otherwise parochial preferences. "Moral discourse" in particular has become what the emotivist C.L. Stevenson argued, falsely, it had always been and can only be, namely a mock rationality actually consisting of expressions of the non-rational and never more than coincidentally compatible feelings of individuals who chance has thrown together. Once consisting of diverse

but largely complementary convictions and patterns of reasoned argumentation, "morality" and "moral life" have become names for arenas of protracted and rationally non-terminable disagreement and conflict. By telling a story of how we came to lose what our ancestors had (and what a fortunate but apparently deserving few of our culturally most marginal contemporaries still enjoy), MacIntyre does what he can to help us through the dark times that we moderns have brought upon ourselves.

More philosophically acute than the in some ways analogous lamentations of visceral anti-modernists such as Ivan Illich and Robert Nisbet, and containing passages the genuine philosophical importance of which is independent of the pervasive disaffection that surrounds them (the trenchant analyses of currently fashionable Kantianisms (AV 63-7), the accounts of "practices" and of the "narrative structure" of human action (Chs. 14-15), the unmasking of scientific social science and the managerialism for which it provides a bogus but dangerous rationale (Chs. 7-8)), taken at anything like face value the most startling critical contentions of this work are nevertheless unpersuasive and its moral and political recommendations at once fanciful and frightening. We can begin to see why by examining MacIntyre's deeply anomalous notion that ours is an emotivist culture.

I

In any very strict or disciplined sense of either term, the concepts "emotivist" and "culture" cannot be put together. In the arresting and deeply disturbing formulation that secured its place as the thus far (including After Virtue) no more than insecurely domesticated *bête noire* of moral philosophy, emotivism is the doctrine that moral (and aesthetic, and religious) words are literally meaningless. What is commonly called moral discourse is scarcely distinguishable from the brays and grunts of dumb animals. In A.J. Ayer's formulation in Language, Truth, and Logic (which MacIntyre largely ignores, preferring the blander and already partially domesticated version of C.L. Stevenson), words like "good", "right", "just", "beautiful", "ugly", and "divine" are simply ejaculations. Presumably (but not verifiably) propelled by psychological or other inner states and forces, these expressions well up in and burst forth from the bodies of human beings. So far from having a more or less determinate, interpersonally intelligible meaning, they do not qualify as vocables, as what John Locke called "articulate sounds". The notion that utterances consisting of such ejaculations could be true or false, right or wrong, valid or invalid, felicitous or infelicitous, justified or lacking in justification is worse than a misunderstanding; it is a delusion - albeit one that has the standing of a superstition.

There is no equivalently canonical articulation of the concepts "culture" or "a culture". But MacIntyre evidently intends to use these concepts in the

manner of cultural anthropologists and his phrase "those intricate bodies of theory and practice which constitute human cultures" (AV 10), severely condenses but does not otherwise distort their usage. The phrase does make it plain that "emotivist culture" is literally a contradiction in terms. If or insofar as the theory called emotivism correctly depicted the goings-on in the affairs of human beings, those affairs would include no theories, no practices, and certainly no "intricate bodies" of either. As anthropologists deploy the concept, a culture need not be, perhaps could not be, 'of a piece'. There can be conflict, disagreement, disjunction, misunderstanding, and even mutual incomprehension in various respects and among various groups, strata, classes, and the like. There can even be 'cultures of conflict' the members of which relate to one another primarily in a violent manner. But whether violent or irenic, conflictful or cooperative, stable or rapidly changing, in order to be styled 'cultural' interactions must for the most part be mutually intelligible and evaluable. They must display, and be recognized by participants as displaying, the very characteristics that emotivism denies to moral concepts and to interactions involving those concepts.

We should note at once that MacIntyre enters various qualifications to his "disquieting suggestion" that ours is an emotivist culture. We soon learn that his less acerbic passages use "emotivist" in a "broad sense" (AV 25) that allows of as much mutual comprehension of moral claims as one could wish. And while he claims that disagreement is ubiquitous and interminable, as the work unfolds it emerges that the modern liberal societies he describes are characterized by clearly defined informal patterns and a great deal of formal organization. The informal patterns are at least dimly understood by participants and are and could only be sustained by their intentional actions and interactions. The formal organizations are the objects of much grumbling and discontent, but countless of them enjoy at least the degree of legitimacy afforded by general acquiescence and widespread involvement.

Despite these qualifications and their bearing on MacIntyre's self-styled "drastic" moral and political recommendations, it will repay us to tarry somewhat with a literal reading of his startling contention and to elaborate somewhat the objection already brought against it.

The difficulties with the notion of an emotivist culture are wider and deeper than is signalled by the conceptual criticism I have thus far offered. Even if we allow that persons of whom emotivism is true could hold beliefs, issue utterances, and take actions, the beliefs, utterances, and actions of any one person would be meaningless, that is unintelligible, to all other 'members' of the aggregation. (To notice this is of course instantly to disallow the supposition just allowed. The beliefs, utterances, and actions would be 'private' in the radical sense shown by Wittgenstein

to be untenable. But let this pass.) They would be particularized in the most radical sense. But if this were true, how could they be intelligible to anyone - e.g., to an analyst of or commentator concerning them? To be blunt, how could they be intelligible - as he unhesitatingly claims they are - to MacIntyre?¹

MacIntyre is recognizably an Hegelian of sorts. Although he "stands Hegel on his head" in the sense that his historical sociology traces degeneration not progress, charts the march of irrationality not of Reason, he claims to have detected the pattern or gestalt in modernity. Indeed there is more than a hint that he has discerned necessity itself. Although his history is a kind of whiggism in that it works backward from the present to the past from which it deviated, there is a relentlessness, an implacability, to the story he tells. When the Enlightenment writers abandoned the teleological view of human kind, they set in motion a train of events that ran inexorably to the dark times that are our own (AV Chs. 4-6).

In short, MacIntyre wants to have it both ways in further senses than wanting the "culture" he derides to be "emotivist". From an epistemological perspective he wants a blooming, buzzing confusion of radical particulars to make perfect (if horrendous) sense; he claims that what he himself characterizes as unintelligible is at the same time fully intelligible. Nor is this intelligibility of merely theoretical or historical significance. Although Hegelian in his historicist insistence that the present can only be understood by examining the past from which it emerged, MacIntyre has taken wing not at dusk but at the dark noon of modern culture. He draws radical practical conclusions from his historical sociology and urges those conclusions upon the rest of us. It seems that with his help we can divine not only the intelligible in our morass of mutual unintelligibility but the steps we should take to escape the latter. Having lost anything like a commune culture at the level of the large, encompassing societies that we inherited, we are instructed to abandon these units and form ourselves into tiny islands of coherence (Ch. 18). Mirroring the impossibilities of the analysis in which it is allegedly grounded, if taken seriously this program goes the wellknown Baron Münchhausen at least one better. Small groups of us are to grasp what little is left of our rational and moral locks and fling ourselves out of our cultural swamp onto the back of the good pony Community. And because little or no firm cultural ground remains, our muddled and struggling little steed must be all but the entirety of our Culture.

II

"Emotivist culture" is primarily a rhetorical device. We are not in fact given the impossibility - the absurdity - of a collection of unintelligible particulars that nevertheless dictates a program of action. Rather, we have before us a sweeping interpretation-cum-lamentation of the liberal culture of modernity. Modernity has a definite shape and character, a shape and character that MacIntyre has come to despise and from which he yearns to escape. He employs the philosophically shocking terminology of emotivism to jolt us out of our complacency and into recognition of the truly radical measures that must be taken.

Let us look more closely at MacIntyre's brief against the liberal societies of modernity. What is it about them that is so objectionable? Because on his own account of them they are intelligible, it is not as first appears their incomprehensibility that arouses his ire. (Could one dislike the literally unintelligible?) In his more measured formulations it appears that he dislikes them because they are rife with interminable moral disagreement and conflict; because they largely lack the cognitive, conceptual, and ratiocinative capacities and resources necessary to resolving moral disagreements in a rational manner. There is moral disagreement. Proponents and opponents of abortion, of affirmative action, of wars of liberation, of nuclear armament, understand wherein they disagree. They do not, in other words, simply go past one another like darkened ships in an emotivist night. But moral and political argument is, or is all too often, an exercise in frustration apt to deteriorate further into manipulation, imposition, and indeed "civil war by other means" (AV 236). Our deepest suppositions about ourselves and our communities exclude the possibility of more than contingent, indeed more than coincidental, agreement about moral questions.

This analysis and condemnation of the liberal societies of modernity is by comparison with previous societies and previous epochs in the history of western civilization. MacIntyre's initial justification for these extended comparisons is that they show, pace Stevenson and its other theorists, that emotivism is only circumstantially not necessarily or even generally true. Recognizing this by studying our past will give us hope and strength to face the present and the future. But of course emotivism in a philosophically powerful or interesting sense is, by MacIntyre's at least tacit admission, not even circumstantially true. Agreement in various matters, including many moral matters, is still possible and does obtain in modern societies. What, then, is the justification for and the purpose of the comparisons? Why does a moral philosopher deeply disturbed about moral life in his own time devote more than a third of his book to ancient, medieval, and early modern materials?

The most general answer to this question lies in MacIntyre's neo-Hegelian historicism. We cannot understand present culture unless we understand the predecessor cultures from which it emerged. More specifically, our moral suppositions and conceptions are ill-assorted fragments of earlier, better integrated sets of suppositions and conceptions. We can make sense of, and come to reasoned conclusions as to what to do with and about these fragments, only by recovering their earlier, more coherent forms (for MacIntyre's most systematic statement of this view, see his 1984).

It is tempting to attribute a more particular and more ideological purpose to MacIntyre's historical comparisons. It is clear that he finds vastly more to admire in earlier cultures (or at least their official conceptions) than in the dominant culture of his own time, and he might be taken to be recommending, *à la* Illich or Nisbet, a return to a previous age. As we see below, there is a sense in which this interpretation is correct. But it is incorrect if taken to mean that we should, or could, erase our recent history and our present and make ourselves into 5th Century Christians or Quattrocento Florentines. The dialectic of history has no reverse gear. The specific content of the human *telos* and the form of moral and political community necessary to realizing it, the catalogue of virtues accepted and promoted by Cicero or Dante or Jane Austen, as admirable as they were in their own settings, are not available to us. "It may be thought that the conclusion to which I have been moving is that we ought to try and move towards an older and more traditional social world. But I leave that Utopian fantasy to the conservatives. If ... we stand among ruins, it is important to recognize that they are ruins." (MacIntyre 1977, 209)

The comparisons are nevertheless in the service of more than a generalized historicism. We can understand their purpose, in part, by reverting to MacIntyre's claim that for all of its disorder and conflict modern culture is in fact intelligible. Intelligibility presupposes concepts, categories, and criteria. We must be able to subsume particulars under general headings and assess the resulting patterns by criteria of judgment that we hold more or less constant as we move from datum to datum. Yet, at least in the cultural sciences, these concepts and criteria must themselves have a discernible place in the thought and action of the agents whose activities we are trying to understand and assess. MacIntyre's accounts of earlier cultural epochs are intended, among other things, to satisfy these requirements and hence permit us to make sense of modern culture. Earlier cultures and their high culture spokespersons (philosophers and dramatists, historians, poets, and novelists) involved highly refined and carefully integrated sets or constellations of such conceptions and criteria. We have lost the coherence, shattered the integration, of these views. But shards and distorted echoes of them continue to play a central part in our thinking, judging, and acting. Suitably reconstructed and deployed, they provide conceptualizations appropriate for our own attempts at

cultural hermeneutics. Thus the particulars of MacIntyre's historical discussions are indispensable elements in his interpretation and assessment of the particulars of the culture of modernity.

Nor is this the end of their significance. MacIntyre does not recommend a return to the substance of any previous culture. But there can be no doubt that he favors the re-creation of what I will call the form or structure that he thinks characteristic of pre-modern societies. I explain and defend this analysis below. Having anticipated it, I want to linger a bit with the epistemological point just discussed.

If I am correct that MacIntyre's historical accounts are integral to his analysis of contemporary culture, it follows that the latter will be no more accessible and no more illuminating or convincing than the former. This presents us with a three-fold initial difficulty.

First, MacIntyre's sweeping history is not just selective and schematic, it is sketchy and often arbitrary. A relative handful of philosophers and literary figures are elevated to the status not only of seers but of representative figures. Although he allows that the societies or cultures of which these giants were part succeeded only imperfectly in living by the understandings articulated in their epics, treatises, and novels, MacIntyre writes as if those contributions to high culture accurately convey the beliefs and ideals that characterized those societies and cultures. This procedure comports badly with his official view that high cultural formulations such as those of moral philosophers presuppose a sociology and that we must understand the former in the light of the latter not vice versa (AV Ch. 3, beginning). Moreover, MacIntyre's characterizations of earlier periods are almost without exception highly controversial and he rarely troubles to defend them against leading alternative views. The narrowly selective and assertive quality of his presentation does not inspire confidence that his comparisons between modern and premodern cultures are reliable concerning either. Most important, the fact that the historical accounts are sketchy means that the criteria MacIntyre is using to determine the distinctive and distinctively unworthy character of modernity are uncertain and difficult to apply.

Second, even on MacIntyre's own telling the history of the predecessor cultures of modernity is well-supplied with diversity. Although in very general terms his book is of the familiar genre that organizes itself by a distinction between ancients and moderns (and that prefers the former to the latter), MacIntyre's "ancients", running as they do from Homer to Jane Austen, make up a heterogeneous array. Again, he claims that there are formal or structural commonalities that distinguish the entire array from modernity, commonalities that present themselves under such headings as telos, community, and virtue together with an understanding of reason and

rationality as inseparable from the first three elements or moments. But the particulars of the human telos, of the character of the community and the content of the virtues that are necessary to achieving it, and hence of the conception of reason, vary substantially and significantly from one pre-modern culture to the next. An analysis and critique of modernity that took its bearings from the agonal, kin-oriented culture depicted by Homer would be a very different thing from one that proceeded from the moral perfectionism of Aristotle, the other-worldliness of early Christian communities, the classical republicanism of Machiavelli or Harrington, and so forth. MacIntyre's answer to this objection is implicit in the already mentioned claim that a unifying sub-stratum (or superstratum) undergirds (overarches) these differences. But in advance of considering the details of this thesis we can say that the undifferentiated and uncompromising quality of his condemnation of modernity is difficult to square with the diversity and complexity presented by (even) his highly schematic history of the pre-modern era. If that history were more adequate in specificity and complexity, the distinction between modern and ancient cultures would of certainty blur yet further.

Third, by MacIntyre's own insistence no one of the versions or instances of pre-modern thought and practice is philosophically satisfactory for our purposes. His philosophical favorite is clearly Aristotle. (His sentimental favorite seems to be Jane Austen, perhaps because she, anticipating MacIntyre himself, articulated a teleological and virtue-oriented communitarian outlook in the face of the already powerful winds of modernity.) But Aristotle is found seriously wanting. His teleology was grounded in an untenable metaphysical biology, he had no sense of the historical character of human experience, he tied his moral reflections too closely to a parochial conception of community (the polis), he exaggerated the unity of the virtues, and he hankered for a moral harmony so entire as to banish tragedy and conflict from human affairs and hence deprive humanity of wisdom about its proper ends (AV 152-3). In the light of MacIntyre's own objections to modernity, this is a far from trivial list of charges. And because later Aristotelians failed to remedy these deficiencies (indeed repeated and sometimes compounded these errors), we are left without a coherent and otherwise tenable position. In particular, we have in hand no adequate conception of rationality and hence no satisfactory means of establishing the rational superiority of one moral outlook, conception, or stance over any other.

MacIntyre promises to address this difficulty in a later book; in this respect we can only cultivate the Confucian virtue of patience (which, as I understand it, is a less impatient patience than MacIntyre himself discusses at pp. 188-89). Of course MacIntyre himself is after virtue in this respect. The impossibility of achieving rationally justifiable resolutions of major moral issues is his strongest complaint against our culture; he confesses

his own present inability to remedy this deep defect; here and now he issues wholesale denunciations and condemnations of modernity. But MacIntyre's impatience, so characteristic of the radical temper he represents, is not the main point of present concern. Lacking MacIntyre's own developed account of rationality and of a culture that adequately embodies and manifests it, we are at best imperfectly placed to understand or to assess his analysis and condemnation of modernity. (To use an image from motoring, MacIntyre might be accused of that species of reckless driving known as overdriving one's headlights. Because he conceives of himself as traveling a lonely road it is perhaps understandable that he hopes to escape serious misadventure. But can we credit his accounts of the terrain he traverses at such speed and in such light?)

III

There are of course reasons to doubt that any historical analysis, however detailed, could be more than suggestive about 'the present' in which it is written. From the perspective of, say, Michael Oakeshott, the idea that historical study could guide, or even illuminate, anything other than the past that is properly its exclusive concern, commits an ignoratio elenchi (see Oakeshott 1933, esp. Ch. III, and Oakeshott 1962). MacIntyre himself at least appears to be inconstant on his class of questions. On the one hand, he is an historicist whose lengthy discussions of earlier epochs are explicitly inspired by and clearly intended to contribute to the resolution of present concerns. On the other, he excoriates scientific social science (and its handmaiden managerialism) oriented to prediction and control and he insists that human activities characteristically occur in "practices" marked by internal goods that must be understood and assessed from the "inside" (AV 175-6). If we focus on the latter dimensions of his argument we may be puzzled by the presence of lengthy historical discussion in a book that is nothing if not engagé, but we will not be surprised that those discussions are less than conclusive concerning contemporary issues.

If these several contentions can be reconciled, doing so must rely on one of MacIntyre's views that I have mentioned more than once, namely that certain commonalities unite pre-Enlightenment cultures and differentiate them from the salient, distinctive characteristics of modernity. As noted, MacIntyre emphasizes that lists of the virtues, and the understanding of the ends served by them, have varied substantially over the centuries. But common to all of the many societies in which virtue was a central moral notion (by contrast with modernity where, except for culturally residual and marginal groups, it has been emptied of significance and largely replaced by notions such as skill) MacIntyre finds an array of elements including the following: practices with internal goods that can only be achieved by virtuous conduct; a larger community encompassing

(among other things) numerous practices and characterized by conceptions of a good for the entire lives of the individual members and a yet larger but complementary good for the community as a whole; a tradition or traditions out of which the several interrelated notions of good have evolved and in which they continue to change; a conception of human activity - whether the activities of individuals or of various collectives - according to which activity takes its meaning from the settings in which it occurs and particularly from its place in narratives or stories that agents relate to themselves and to one another as a part of and concerning what they are doing and why (AV Ch. 14).

It has to be stressed yet again that the substantive character or content of these several elements has varied widely and in necessarily unpredictable ways. Thus if one searches history for a substantive morality, for answers to this or that specific moral question, disappointment will of certainty ensue. But these elements, this form or structure as we might put it, persisted from Homer to Austen. It persists still in marginal sub-cultures such as, apparently, that sub-culture in which MacIntyre's own "father and his sisters and brothers" were participants (Chs. 14-15, vi.). The general loss of this structure of moral understanding and belief is at bottom what puts modernity "after virtue"; it is the tragedy of modernity.

IV

There is enough merit in the distinction between substance and form to warrant MacIntyre's denial that he indulges the utopian fancies of conservatives. (Put too glibly, unlike many anti-modernists, MacIntyre is a radical, not a reactionary.) But allowing this much only opens, it does not resolve, the major questions about MacIntyre's diagnosis of and prescriptions for the ills of modernity.

There is an important sense in which the form of society or culture that MacIntyre prefers is also its substance. It is clearly the form of pre-modern societies that he most admires, and it is equally clear that it is the modern destruction of that form that he most regrets. Crucial in this regard is the communalism or communitarian character of pre-modern arrangements as he describes them, the atomistic, anti-communal tendencies so marked in modernity. Pre-modern societies understood themselves as wholes or organisms and conceived of their individual members not as independent, autonomous, self-subsistent entities but as parts of the whole. The particulars of this understanding varied substantially from place to place and time to time. But it invariably implied not only the ontological and epistemological primacy of the community over the individual - a primacy more widely insisted upon by modern writers than MacIntyre allows

- but a moral and political subordination of the individual. The beliefs and values, the desires and interests, the conceptions of good, that individual human beings form and act upon would be impossible apart from some community and are incomprehensible apart from the particular communities in which they are (directly or vicariously) participants. But insisting on this point leaves unsettled whether or to what extent cultures should be, in the moral or at least normative sense, communalist or communitarian. To explain this distinction I now consider a notion, individual rights, that MacIntyre correctly says is far more salient in modern moral and political practice than in previous cultures.

Having rights, certainly enjoying respect and protection in exercising them, is a condition inconceivable apart from rather elaborate cultural, social, political, and usually legal understandings and arrangements. Rights are established in and by conventions or rules that have authoritative standing in some more or less clearly identifiable society, community, or state. Absent at least these elements,² rights could only be the suppositious entities that they appear to be when natural rights theorists are taken literally. Insofar as individuals think of themselves as holders of rights, and insofar as they conceive of their actions as exercising those rights, their self-identifications and -conceptions are necessarily social or communal in content. There is an internal relationship, one of mutual conceptual dependence, between their identifications and larger conceptions and entities that are not only practically impossible but conceptually inconceivable apart from a society or community. As a logical or conceptual, and hence an ontological and epistemological matter, rights-bearing and rights-exercising creatures are social or communal creatures.³

MacIntyre and other normative communitarians are correct that the salience of individual rights in modern western societies, their far greater salience than in earlier societies, signals an important cultural change, a change that, if MacIntyre's accounts of earlier cultural forms are accurate, can properly be characterized as a decline or diminution of communality or a communitarian outlook and disposition. The most obvious respect in which this is true is part of the logic of 'rights' as we most commonly employ it. Although rights are established in and assigned or distributed by communities, their effect - which certainly must also be the more or less self-conscious intention of a preponderance of those who participate in the processes by which they are established and distributed - is to license their bearers to conduct their affairs with no or at least with narrowly circumscribed concern for other members of the community and for such beliefs and values as the community as such may collectively or collectively hold. And insofar as the rights are respected by others, they protect the individuals who bear them from a variety of kinds of interferences by other individuals and by agents and agencies of the community. In these respects, which are part of what can properly be called the meaning of the

concept of a right, rights are anti-communitarian or anti-communalist in the most familiar normative senses of those terms.

It is probably also true, at least as a generalization, that the practice of rights as we know it is anti-communitarian in further, arguably deeper respects. It is at least plausible to think that the contemporary ubiquity of and ubiquitous enthusiasm for individual rights reflects the kinds of beliefs associated with Sir Isaiah Berlin, Michael Oakeshott, and John Rawls, i.e., that a plurality of defensible conceptions of good and of the good life can, abstractly, readily be conceived, that the at least minimally selfconscious and critically minded members of societies which have achieved some degree of material well-being will in fact form and seek to act upon a considerable diversity of such conceptions, and that attempts to reduce or eliminate this diversity, particularly if made at the level and in the name of (the authority of) the society as a whole, will cause great harm and suffering in the course of failing to achieve their imagined objectives. To the extent that such beliefs are in fact entertained in modern societies, and to the extent that individual rights are understood as and favored because they are consonant with and serve the values implicit in those beliefs, to that extent rights oriented modern societies are yet more deeply at odds with normative communitarianism such as MacIntyre attributes to the form or structure of pre-modern societies.

But these considerations have to be handled with greater care than MacIntyre lavishes upon them. To begin with, distinctions ought to be maintained between an emotivist culture and a culture whose members hold beliefs more akin to Berlin's "voluntarism" or Rawls' "Kantian constructivism" than to Ayer's or Stevenson's emotivism, Kierkegaard's or Sartre's radical subjectivisms. The extended and complex set of events and interactions through which modern practices of rights took their present shapes were communal in at least the following sense: they involved large numbers of people, people who conceived of themselves as in more than transient and happenstance relations with one another; they involved thought and action that were mutually intelligible by the criteria of shared languages and common traditions and that required or at least commonly elicited responses from one another, and that led over time to new understandings and expectations together with arrangements that embodied those understandings and made possible the satisfaction or frustration of those expectations. It would be wrong to talk of a 'decision', rational or otherwise, to adopt individual rights as a salient feature of moral and political life. But the evolution of rights to their present established position cannot be understood apart from the success of a great many people in understanding, influencing, and convincing one another on many matters and arriving at a quite firm and quite encompassing consensus on numerous once unsettled or disputed points. It may well be that the belief that there are definite limits on moral rationality, and hence definite limits on the

possibility of reaching mutually acceptable conclusions on moral and related matters, played a significant role in his process. But that in itself is, or could as well as not be, a belief arrived at through reasoned deliberation and exchange. And in any case it is no small matter that millions of human beings arrived at and taught themselves to act more or less steadily on such a belief.

As a common understanding of the notion of rights developed, that is as a part of that development, it became possible to make decisions concerning what rights should and should not be established and how they should be distributed. These decisions, and the innumerable further decisions about whether and how to exercise rights, whether to respect them and what would count as doing so, how to interpret them when conflicts developed among them, how to coordinate rights with other concerns and considerations, were and continue to be communal in, if anything, a stronger sense or stronger senses. Some at least of these decisions were made deliberately by agents invested with communally established authority and in circumstances that not only allowed and encouraged but required the giving of reasons for the decisions. MacIntyre is correct that many such decisions and much such reason giving leave large numbers of people unconvinced and sharply dissatisfied. I leave aside except for this comment the fact that his favorite examples of interminable (at least in the sense of leaving many participants unconvinced) debate concern issues that have been matters of deep and continuing disagreement in every society (known to me) that has had occasion to consider them. For now the vastly more salient fact is that a myriad of such communal decisions have been arrived at, widely accepted, and quite generally acted upon in the modern societies that MacIntyre is discussing. If this were not the case, there would be no such thing as the practices of rights that MacIntyre laments (cf. Wittgenstein 1953, I, 143). MacIntyre's account of the patterns that make modern culture intelligible systematically ignores this (and any number of strongly analogous phenomena).

The salience of rights in modern cultures, in short, demonstrates that there is a substantial and quite firm consensus, an extensive body of authoritative moral and political belief, in these cultures. Are we to think, as MacIntyre's most startling contentions require us to do, that this consensus developed and has been sustained entirely or even largely by a coincidental concatenation of the purely subjective impulses and inclinations of millions of fragmented, anomic, individuals? By manipulation? By coercion of compulsion? On MacIntyre's own deepest suppositions about human beings and human action - the very suppositions that allow him to think that we might escape from or at least ameliorate somewhat our dismal estate - none of these hypotheses are even remotely plausible.

A couple of further points in respect to this matter of individual rights. The immediately foregoing remarks are implicitly at the level of the general society. They concern rights adopted for and distributed (however unevenly or unfairly) across society as a whole. It is therefore consistent with those remarks - as well as pretty obviously the case - that there is consensus, or various pockets of consensus, on two further matters. The first of these concerns what can and should be attempted by the society as a whole, as a single more or less organized collectivity. To stay within the limited (albeit by no means narrow) confines of rights, to what extent can and should there be a uniform system of rights, one that applies to and holds for all members? Of course this is currently a matter of lively debate in a number of societies. Once again, however, our recognition that there is a debate manifests our at least tacit awareness that there continues to be much agreement. Perhaps this agreement will, perhaps it should, disintegrate. Perhaps MacIntyre and a few equally disaffected souls are correct that the day of large, internally diverse but nevertheless centrally organized societies should now end.⁴ But the fervor with which he presents his plea betrays his recognition that a very large number of people continue to sustain their own and one another's conviction(s) that for some considerable number of purposes such a system of rights should be maintained. It is worth remarking that this consensus concerns a modern version of what is arguably the most fundamental of all political questions and the political question that has more bearing than any other on the moral life of a people. Certainly no one who makes questions about community central to morality can deny its importance.

The second further matter is the other side of the coin of the first. In the societies MacIntyre is discussing, the continuing agreement that for some purposes there should be a society-wide system of rights coexists with the view (most forcefully expressed in the almost uniform condemnation of totalitarianism) that many matters - especially many moral matters - should be left to sub-societal communities, groups, and associations. Most of the articulations of this view known to me involve the assumption that the members of these smaller communities will do better at resolving issues to one another's mutual satisfaction than the larger and more diverse populations of nationstates. And there is no doubt that this assumption commonly reflects a certain skepticism about the efficacy and perhaps the possibility of moral reasoning. For this reason, the prevalence of this view might be taken as support for MacIntyre's position. Without taking up the entire involved matter, two considerations should be emphasized. First, the view assumes that members of families, communes, and cities, universities, corporations, and professions, can reach and sustain agreement despite being participants in the overall culture of modernity. If the acids of modernity have eaten away anything like so much of our moral fabric as MacIntyre suggests, it is difficult to see how this assumption could be justified. This consideration has more than a little bearing on MacIntyre's

most specific and most drastic prescriptions. Second and more immediately pertinent, it seems fair to say that the consensus in question presupposes a belief that sub-communities and associations will conduct their affairs, if not to the liking of the larger society, at least in a manner that the latter regards as tolerable. At a minimum this means that the sub-groups must not violate rights established at the level of the society as a whole. The frequent and widely supported interventions in the affairs of families, communal and religious groups, professions, etc., is further evidence of agreement and authoritative belief at the level of the overall societies into which modern western culture continues to be organized. Nor would it be correct to say that such interventions are limited to instances involving the violation of established rights. Certainly it would be false to say this of interventions by agents and agencies other than governments.

Up to now I have been arguing that a central feature of the form of modern moral and political life is not only consistent with but requires widespread acceptance of communal elements such as shared conceptualizations and arrangements, collective decision procedures, and a substantial body of widely agreed, effectively authoritative moral belief. In these respects (and simply accepting the accuracy of his accounts of pre-modern cultures), MacIntyre's characterizations of modern societies are seriously incomplete and misleading and his contrasts between modern and pre-modern societies much too sharply drawn. I would add only that it is not impossible that a rights oriented morality might be substantially more communalist than ours presently is. The device of rights, and the particular rights devised and maintained, might be chosen out of belief in and in order to serve a strongly substantive and encompassing conception of the good of all human beings and/or the common good of the community in question (for a recent argument to this effect, see Campbell 1983). Some such overarching, perhaps transcendental, conception is necessarily at work, at some level of consciousness, in the rights-oriented moralities we in fact have. These moralities are incomprehensible apart from this supposition. But this conception could be, or could become without change of 'form', substantially more robust than I have suggested it now is. MacIntyre is probably correct that virtues and the notion of virtuous conduct play a marginal and uncertain role in interactions understood as the exercise and respect or violation of rights. Qualities such as vigor, resourcefulness, persistence, and even courage are frequently attributed to and admired in those who insist on their rights in the face of attempts to deny or violate them. At times of sharp conflict - as in the Civil Rights struggles in the United States and certainly in the struggles in progress in partly rights-oriented societies such as South Africa and Poland - such conduct sometimes achieves genuinely heroic proportions. But in societies with comparatively well settled systems of rights - and it is one of the burdens of my foregoing remarks that the societies MacIntyre has primarily in mind are vastly more settled in these respects than he allows - the

qualities most characteristic of rights exercisers are more of the nature of skills - for example the skills of the lawyer - than of virtues. Or if they are thought of as virtues, they are most likely to be the "bourgeois virtues" celebrated by Benjamin Franklin.

But this could be otherwise. Consider the conception of the rights of freedom of speech, press, and association advanced by Alexander Meiklejohn and influential with jurists such as Hugo Black and William O. Douglas. According to Meiklejohn, these rights are at most secondarily for the purpose of advancing and defending the personal interests and objectives of those who bear them. Indeed they are accorded not to individual persons in their particularity but to citizens, that is, to persons holding an office that has been established by the community in order to achieve its collective purposes. Accordingly, the scope of the rights, the classes of actions judged to be protected by them, is properly determined by whether the actions are necessary to achieving those communal purposes. Thus 'commercial' speech and publication, and various other merely self- or group-serving modes of expression, are not to receive the protections of these rights. This is a strongly Aristotelian conception which is entirely compatible with the idea of the virtuous or the unvirtuous exercise of rights.

Of course the conception of political rights that I have just sketched is not dominant in contemporary societies. And we have extended the concept and practice of rights to many activities that could be thought of as virtuously performed, if at all, only on a Franklinesque understanding of the virtues. I do not, in short, want to overstate the case against MacIntyre. My point, to bring this stretch of discussion to a conclusion, is two-fold. MacIntyre has badly underestimated the communal dimensions of moral and political life in rights-oriented contemporary societies as they are and he has drawn much too sharply his distinction between societies of the contemporary 'form' and pre-modern societies of the alternative form he prefers.

V

It does not follow from anything that I have said that MacIntyre is wrong to dislike and to want radically to change moral and political life in modern cultures. As with his charge that these cultures are emotivist, his contention that contemporary morals and politics are "civil war by other means" is gross exaggeration. Indeed for much of the human race the phenomena that are dismissed with the phrase "by other means" would amount to the difference between an at least minimally civilized and tolerable existence and hell on earth. But none of this debars him from disapproving modernity and preferring the alternative ideal of human life implicit in his accounts of pre-modern societies. If not as sharply distinct

as he suggests, that ideal is certainly distinguishable. It calls for integration and harmonization grounded in substantive, encompassing, but rational agreement about ends and purposes and the modes of conduct necessary to achieve them. Were it realized moral and political life would be less diverse, less divisive and conflictful, and less coercive where division and conflict remained than is now the case in the societies MacIntyre condemns. In MacIntyre's judgment it would also be more meaningful in the sense both of readily intelligible and of providing the kinds of satisfactions and fulfillments that supervene upon genuinely cooperative activity. Leaving aside the adequacy of MacIntyre's accounts of the various expressions and articulations that this general ideal has received, the frequent reappearance in western thought and practice of versions of that ideal testifies to its appeal.

It is less clear that MacIntyre's presentation in this book significantly enhances the attractiveness of the ideal for the audience he is addressing. His argument depends heavily upon characterizations of modernity that, by the suppositions of his own conceptualization, are badly exaggerated and otherwise misleading. Insofar as his case for an alternative vision depends upon his criticisms of the understandings and practices presently in place, that case is therefore unpersuasive. The rhetorical excess of "emotivist culture" and "civil war by other means" works against not for him.

More serious is the fact that MacIntyre has thus far circled around not directly addressed the most difficult questions he raises. As we have seen, he enters serious objections against the pre-modern formulations that are at once the bases of his criticisms of modernity and the chief sources of his sketched alternative to the latter. More important, he insists that those formulations do not provide an adequate conception of moral reasoning or a serviceable set of criteria for assessing the rationality of moral arguments. At most, then, he has thus far claimed that these earlier understandings are more conducive to interpersonally conclusive moral and political reasoning than the modern alternatives, less conducive to stalemate and exasperation in moral and political life. And this claim is further weakened by his admission that in practice societies in possession of these allegedly superior understandings were nevertheless rent by destructive conflict.

Nor does MacIntyre claim to have remedied the defects in the most eligible earlier understandings of moral reasoning. Insofar as he can be said to have anticipated doing so (primarily in his discussion of "functional concepts", AV 54-8), his remarks are admitted by him to depend on assumptions that modern philosophers regard as decisively refuted. Owing to this conviction, which on MacIntyre's telling quickly became general, modern philosophers have rejected the account of moral reasoning that MacIntyre seems to be anticipating. It of course follows that until MacIntyre presents convincing arguments for those (or some functionally

equivalent alternative) assumptions, he will have given his audience no reason for changing their views about moral reasoning and no reason for adopting whatever substantive moral conclusions he comes to advocate. The root of the difficulty with modernity is left untouched.

Given this circumstance it is tempting to speculate about the possible consequences, and hence the prudence or wisdom, of MacIntyre's performance in this book. Let us assume that we are an emotivist culture and that After Virtue attracts wide attention among us.⁵ On these assumptions two outcomes suggest themselves. The first is that MacIntyre's claim to have presented interpersonally valid arguments about morality will be dismissed as pretence, self-deception, or both. Instead of asking ourselves whether MacIntyre's conclusions are true or valid or justified, each of us will attempt to unmask them; we will try to discover what preferences or interests motivate them and how the resulting forces impinge on our own personal concerns. On this scenario, the writing and the appearance of After Virtue will have no special significance and raise no very urgent questions.

The second possibility is less benign. On Stevensonian assumptions moral life includes continuing, more or less stable, values and patterns of choice and action as well as transitory emotions and impulses. The principles, rules, and rights, the institutional arrangements and their established procedures, the modern beliefs about right and wrong, duty and obligation that MacIntyre discusses, are examples of such more or less settled features of our emotivist culture. But Stevensonian emotivism not only allows of but gives its closest attention to the ways in which and particularly the various rhetorical devices by which we persuade one another to alter our beliefs and dispositions. MacIntyre aims to persuade us that our morals and politics are a species of civil war conducted among the ruins of a fallen civilization. Of course he aims to do more than this. He attempts to persuade us to constitute ourselves anew and better. But our working assumptions include the proviso that our culture lacks a conception of rationality that would permit us, mutually, to so much as make sense of 'better'. In this perspective, it is more than plausible to think that MacIntyre will do better at achieving his critical than his constructive objectives. On the assumptions from which the book proceeds, and despite his concluding perorations, its upshot is far more likely to be Nietzschean than Benedictinian.

I do not, however, want to conclude with these somewhat uncongenial speculations. The vital questions about After Virtue concern not the verisimilitude of this account of moral and political life in modernity but his assault on liberal beliefs and ideals. No sane proponent of liberalism would deny that there is much that is deeply objectionable in modern societies. Cruelty, relieveable but unrelieved suffering, blatant injustice, abound in

societies most directly influenced by and most closely approximating the best expressions of the liberal outlook. The more profound questions are whether the liberal ideal is therefore discredited and whether something like MacIntyre's more substantively and insistently communitarian conception would be an improvement. I cannot elaborate or defend my own primarily negative answers to these questions here. Instead I end with a passage which, partly because it is from the pen of a writer who has proven himself immune to the epistemological and ontological diseases that have too often afflicted liberalism, sharply challenges the cogency of MacIntyre's critique of liberalism and the eligibility of the alternative vision that accompanies that critique.

A morality, Michael Oakeshott has written, is "a vernacular language". That such a language "should be spoken more or less exactly and with varying degrees of grace or clumsiness, and that there should be near-literates and fraudulent verbalizers; that it should be subject to change, that neologisms should make their appearance, and that antique expressions should survive in its interstices; that it should sometimes be unequal to the occasion and that it should not be only liable to corruption but also commonly corrupt - none of these circumstances is at all remarkable: they are the vicissitudes common to all vernacular languages". Neither should we be surprised that from time to time attempts are made to remedy these defects: "human beings are apt to be disconcerted unless they feel themselves to be upheld by something more substantial than the emanations of their own contingent imaginations. This unresolved plurality teases the monistic yearnings of the muddled theorist, it vexes a moralist with ecumenical learnings, and it may disconcert an unfortunate who, having 'lost' his morality (as others have been known to 'lose' their faith), must set about constructing one for himself and is looking for uncontaminated 'rational' principles out of which to make it." Nevertheless, the availability of such a vernacular will "reassure the modest mortal with a self to disclose and a soul to make who needs a familiar and resourceful moral language (and one for which he may hope to acquire a Sprachgefühl) to do it in and who is disinclined to be unnerved because there are other such languages [even in his own community] to which he cannot readily relate his own". (Oakeshott 1975, 79, 81-2)

Notes

- 1 Cf. in this respect MacIntyre's own entirely correct assessment of empiricism as offering us an uninterpreted and uninterpretable world: AV 76-7.

- 2 I leave aside the deeper but more general and blander Wittgensteinian point that rights presuppose a community in which the concept 'a right' has a more or less settled use or uses.
- 3 Of course the same argument holds for duties and the considerable array of further moral and jural entities which, in the standard Hohfeldian analysis, correlate with or stand in some other conceptually interwoven relationship to rights. With modifications and qualifications that I will not take up here, the argument also holds for the other notions that MacIntyre correctly finds dominant in modern moral and political life, that is principles and rules. Once again, I leave aside the more general point that all concepts, including 'individual', 'freedom', and 'autonomy', presuppose social relationships in whatever sense we assign to obscure Wittgensteinian notions such as language-game and form of life.
- 4 MacIntyre says that we must reject "the modern political order" but immediately goes on to allow that "there are ... many tasks ... to be performed in and through government". I do not know how to reconcile these views. See AV 237.
- 5 It is worth noting first that if we are emotivists à la Ayer or Carnap the second assumption is absurd unless "wide attention" is taken to mean the kind of response that might be aroused by the appearance of a creature from another galaxy. If Ayerian emotivism were true of MacIntyre himself he could not have written large stretches of After Virtue and if it were true of us we could make no sense of much of it. Thus my speculation can proceed only on the assumption that our emotivism is in the Stevensonian mode.

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