Alasdair MacIntyre’s - Virtue Ethics

Alasdair MacIntyre
1929-present
Scottish Moral Philosopher

In MacIntyre’s After Virtue, he examines the history of moral philosophy in its historical context in order to see where the problems set in that have left us in what he sees as an unsatisfactory situation today.

Emotivism, Kant and Utilitarianism have left us in a situation where morality has become depersonalised - the focus is on what is said, what the result is, what rule is followed - rather than being about how to be good people.

MacIntyre says that philosophers have tried to steal the concept of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ from the language. He uses an analogy between morality and science. MacIntyre asks us to imagine a world where natural disasters have turned the public against the natural scientists.

"Widespread riots occur, laboratories are burnt down, physicists are lynched, books and instruments are destroyed. Finally a Know-Nothing political movement takes power and successfully abolishes science teaching in schools and universities, imprisoning and executing the remaining scientists." After this, there is a reaction, and people seek to revive science. “But all they possess are fragments”. They know about experiments, but nothing about the context in which those experiments had meaning. They have instruments, or fragments of them, but no idea of what they were for, or of how to use them.

“Nonetheless all these fragments are re-embodied in a set of practices which go under the revived names of physics, chemistry and biology. Adults argue with each other about the respective merits of relativity theory, evolutionary biology . . . . although they posses only a very partial knowledge of each. Nobody, or almost nobody, realizes that what they are doing is not natural science in any proper sense at all”. For the fragments of knowledge that survive cannot be put into any sensible context, and therefore they make no sense. The framework in which they have meaning has been lost.

MacIntyre says that moral argument is like this at present. Moral reasoning has been undermined to the extent that words like ‘good’, ‘moral’ and ‘useful’, although used frequently, have lost their meaning, their force and their context.
Logical Positivism is no longer a force in philosophy, but what Macintyre terms 'liberal' culture still takes for granted that moral statements are still statements of personal feeling. For instance, a 'liberal' might argue that having casual sexual relationships may be 'wrong' for some people, not because there is an objective standard of right or wrong which governs sexual behaviour, but because they can't take the emotional consequences. As long as 'no-one gets hurt' it's OK.

MacIntyre felt that the failure of philosophy occurred during and after the 'Enlightenment' of the 18th century. He suggested that it was the devaluation of the human virtues and human teleology (the belief that humans have an ultimate purpose in life) which had caused the problem.

Until then morality, the notions of right and wrong, good and bad, had been associated with the type of person you were - you were a good person or a bad person. Without certain qualities of mind, which Aristotle, and St Thomas Aquinas categorized as 'virtues', a person could not live a moral life. Briefly, these virtues, as developed within Thomist thought were: courage, justice, temperance and wisdom (known as Cardinal Virtues) and Faith, Hope and Charity or self-giving love (the 'Theological Virtues'). A moral life was defined as a life in which the person developed into a 'good' person, through 'cultivating the moral virtues through habit, and the intellectual virtues by instruction'. Underpinning all this structure of morality was God, the Divine being who had created everything for His pleasure and to serve Him. In order to reach humanity's divine telos, people needed to be part of the Church, whose priests were in direct contact with God.

This was the notion of humanity and its purpose which was specifically rejected at the Enlightenment. Morality became isolated from any real condition of humanity and was defined as an expression of human feeling (Hume), a universal moral law governing social behaviour (Kant), an individual choice (Kierkegaard), a means for deciding which actions will benefit the most people (Bentham, Mill). For MacIntyre, Neitzsche's theory that 'morality' is simply the exertion of one will in an attempt to subjugate another will is the clearest statement of 'emotivism'.

Having disposed of the context in which morality has force (a context of individual purpose and virtue) and made it instead "simply the expression of personal preference in a culture which has abandoned the virtues and rejected the sense of community". MacIntyre argues that philosophy and society have created three archetypal characters which embody characteristics desirable to sections of society, and who are seen as objects of regard and respect. They are:
The Bureaucratic Manager
Society respects this person for their efficiency at using resources and people to achieve their own aims and objectives. Think of the CEOs of the big banks and corporations, think of the ‘dragons’ from Dragons’ Den. The Bureaucratic Manager is ruthless in taking steps needed to get the desired results. People and resources are all dispensable to the Bureaucratic Manager. The only morality he/she observes is gaining the greatest profit or domination of the market.

The Rich Aesthete
This person lives for pleasures of life and presents an image that others are supposed to copy and aspire to. They are on the ‘showbiz’ pages, they are the ‘celebrity’. What they say and do might seem vacuous and their contribution to the world might seem non-existent, but that is to miss their point. Their contribution to the world is their public image which defines what society deems beautiful or attractive. The actual person might be a nice person, but their contribution to society is their image.

The Therapist
In a society where the role models are the Bureaucratic Manager and the Rich Aesthete - images of the peak of success - what about the vast majority who aspire to be like these but inevitably fail? This is where the Therapist comes in. This societal role model allows the majority to accept the pains of their failed aspirations and thwarted hopes by telling us it’s not actually our fault. Society is stressful and we need to just be kinder to ourselves. Don’t worry if you fail at everything, you need to treat yourself, relax, pamper yourself – you deserve it (notice a familiar theme from many adverts here?) The therapist presents a relativist perspective where nothing is really wrong, there are always excuses. The therapist teaches us to value others less and ourselves more and masks the emptiness and meaninglessness of life. Macintyre suggests that the chat show and games show hosts are examples of people who engage in such therapy.