

## **Alasdair MacIntyre on Some Consequences of the Failure of the Enlightenment Project**

Modern moral theory suffers from problems produced by the failure of the Enlightenment project. So moral philosophers conceive of the individual moral agent as sovereign in his moral authority, since he has been liberated from hierarchy (the categorical character of moral rules as expressions of ultimately divine law) and teleology. In the absence of the ability to establish the rationality of modern formulations of moral rules, they are but expressions of individual desire and will. Utilitarianism is a failed attempt to vindicate them by devising some new teleology. Similarly, seeking, as per Kant, to ground them in the nature of practical reason is a failed attempt to find some new categorical status for them.

### *The Failure of Utilitarianism*

Bentham realized “he *was* assigning a new status to moral rules and giving a new meaning to key moral concepts” (62). He believed traditional morality was pervaded by superstition and that the only motives for human action are attraction to pleasure and aversion to pain. Consequently, enlightened moral principles are formulated with respect to the *telos* of maximum pleasure and aversion to pain. For Bentham “pleasure” and “pain” are sensations, varying only in number, intensity and duration. For Bentham only the educated mind is able to appreciate that there is no hiatus between pursuing personal happiness and pursuing the greatest happiness of the greatest number. Is this empirically true?

Benthamite John Stuart Mill showed it is not. In concluding Bentham’s concept of happiness needed reforming, Mill really cast doubt on the validity of deriving utilitarian morality from the psychology, the precise basis for Bentham’s attempt to ground his new naturalistic teleology in rationality.

Mill sought to distinguish “higher” from “lower” pleasures. This actually undercuts Benthamism by correctly presupposing that “the notion of human happiness is not a unitary, simple notion.” In turn, this means happiness cannot serve as a criterion from making our key choices” (63), that is, there are so many different modes in which happiness is achieved that we are led to ask confusedly, “Which pleasure, which happiness out to guide me?” Indeed,

different pleasures and different happinesses are to a large degree incommensurable: there are no scales of quality or quantity on which to weigh them. Consequently appeal to the criteria of pleasure will not tell me whether to drink or swim and appeal to those of happiness cannot decide for me between the life of a monk and that of a soldier (64).

It follows that there is no clear content to the notion of the greatest happiness of the greatest number. While ideological use of this conceptual fiction has served some socially beneficial ideals (e.g. Mill’s support for the extension of suffrage and for an end to the subjugation of women) we do need to uncover what actual project or purpose is concealed by it.

With the moral philosophy of Sidgwick it finally comes to be accepted that the attempt to restore a teleological framework for ethics has failed, both because the moral injunctions of utilitarianism cannot be derived from any psychological

foundation and because of the complete lack of any logical connection between the precepts enjoining the general happiness and those enjoining the pursuit of personal happiness. Sidgwick announced that where he had looked for Cosmos, he had found but Chaos, discovering that what he called *intuitions* lie at the foundation of moral thinking, namely belief in statements for the truth of which no further reason can be given.

“The history of utilitarianism... links historically the eighteenth-century project of justifying morality and the twentieth century’s decline into emotivism” (65). Utilitarianism peaked in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and was followed by intuitionism in British philosophy. Meanwhile, in the US, pragmatism, like intuitionism paved the way for emotivism. Yet, analytical philosophers remained committed to the futile task of “showing that any rational agent is logically committed to the rules of morality in virtue of his or her rationality” (66).

Alan Gewirth illustrates this maintaining that in order to exercise rationality the rational agent must first assume he possesses a certain degree of freedom and well-being. According to Gewirth, if such freedom and well-being are indeed prerequisites for the exercise of rational agency (being “necessary goods”) then the rational agent must have a right to these goods.

But to claim I have a right to do or have something is not the same as claiming that I need or want or will be benefited by something. Others should not interfere with what I do under the first kind of claim. But this does not apply to action taken under the second kind of claim: it cannot be said that simply because all people need or want or will benefit from something that nobody else should interfere.

Claims to the possession of rights, unlike claims about goods necessary for rational agency, presuppose a socially established set of rules which are not universal, but only exist at particular historical periods under particular social circumstances. Without such a social form to claim a right is akin to presenting a cheque of payment in a social order that lacks the institution of money.

Consequently, not only 19<sup>th</sup> century utilitarianism, but also 20<sup>th</sup> century analytical moral philosophy both fail to rescue the autonomous moral agent from the predicament in which the failure of the Enlightenment project places him, namely of providing a secular, rational justification for his moral allegiances. A price was paid for liberating man from the apparently external authority of traditional morality, that is, “the loss of any authoritative content from the would-be moral utterances of the newly autonomous agent” (68). Both utilitarianism and analytical moral philosophy fail to explain why anyone should listen to a moral agent who speaks “unconstrained by the externalities of divine law, natural teleology or hierarchical authority” (68), though both philosophers and non-philosophers speak as if one of these projects had in fact succeeded. This highlights the gap between the *meaning* of contemporary moral expressions and the ways in which they are put to *use*. The emotivist use is precisely what is to be expected if the philosophical projects have failed.

This means that our contemporary moral experience is paradoxical. On the one hand, we act as though we are autonomous moral agents. On the other hand, our relationships with others are manipulative, even though, because we value our

autonomy, we don't want to be manipulated by others. We are forced to be very manipulative in our relationships precisely so we can succeed in incarnating our own principles and stand-point in the world of practice. Having thus inherited an incoherent conceptual scheme our attitudes and experience is necessarily incoherent.

Consider the place of *rights*, *protest* and *unmasking* in the modern moral scheme. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century there was talk of natural rights or the rights of man (in contrast to rights conferred by positive law or custom on specified classes of people), negatively defined rights that were alleged to belong to human beings as such by way of asserting that people ought not to be interfered with in their pursuit of life, liberty and happiness. Occasionally, but very often in modern times with common talk of "human rights", positive rights were insisted on - rights to due process, to education or to employment. It was assumed that all such rights, negative and positive, attached equally to all individuals, no matter what their sex, religion, talents or deserts.

Before about AD 1400 no one could have known that there was such a thing as natural or human rights since there was no expression in any ancient or medieval language correctly translated by our expression "a right." The plain truth is this: **"there are no such rights, and belief in them is one with belief in witches and in unicorns"** (69).

Just as every attempt to give good reasons for believing in witches and unicorns has failed, so too for believing there *are* such rights. Those who defended natural rights in the 18<sup>th</sup> century sometimes asserted that people's possession of such rights are self-evident truths. But **there is no such thing as a self-evident truth**. When 20<sup>th</sup> century moral philosophers defend this with an appeal to their and our intuitions we know something has gone seriously wrong with the argument. Indeed, since the UN declaration on human rights (1949), the UN has consistently and rigorously adopted the practice of not giving good reasons for *any* assertions whatsoever. Dworkin, conceding the existence of such rights cannot be demonstrated, maintained that it does not follow from this that UN assertions concerning such rights are false. But the same could be said about witches and unicorns.

**Natural or human rights are fictions.** So too is utility. MacIntyre has already demonstrated the implausibility of trying to sum all those experiences and activities which give satisfaction. Given that utility is not a clear concept to use it as if could provide us with a rational criterion is to resort to a fiction.

Both rights and utility as moral fictions purport to provide us with an objective and impersonal criterion, but fail to do so. Therefore, there is inevitably a gap between their purported meaning and the uses to which they are actually put. The social invention of the autonomous moral agent led to the generation of the concept of rights and of utility, as part of the attempt to find substitutes for the now discarded concepts of an older and more traditional morality. Moral incommensurability is the inevitable consequence of all this, since there is no way of deciding what priority or weight to give to clashing moral claims, whether to rights or to utility or to either or both against claims based on a traditional concept of justice.

This throws light on the politics of modern societies, in which the culture of bureaucratic individualism involves political debates between a rights-claiming individualism and a utility-claiming forms of bureaucratic organization. Given that

both rights and utility are incommensurable moral fictions they are only capable of giving the modern political process a semblance of rationality, not real rationality.

Unsurprisingly, then, *protest* is a distinctive moral feature of the modern age, with *indignation* being a predominant moral emotion. It used to be the case that "to protest" was as much positive as negative, to bear witness *to* something and only as a consequence of this to bear witness *against* something else. By contrast, **modern protest is almost completely negative as a reaction against the alleged invasion of someone's *rights* in the name of someone else's *utility*.** But the reality of moral incommensurability means protestors, while they can be effective, cannot be *rationally* effective, since they can never win (nor lose) an *argument*. So protest is characterized by self-assertion. Moral incommensurability means also that protestors rarely have anyone else to talk to but themselves.

Major protagonists of the distinctively modern moral causes of the modern world (excluding those who uphold older traditions coexisting with modernity) hypocritically charge those against whom they contend of concealing, behind the masks of morality, the preferences of arbitrary will and desire, being unwilling to concede this is also true of themselves: "*Unmasking* the unacknowledged motives of arbitrary will and desire which sustain the moral masks of modernity is itself one of the most characteristically modern of activities" (72).

Freud, mistakenly thinking he had understood morality as such rather than what morality had become in late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe, identified the inherited conscience as superego, "an irrational part of ourselves whose commands we need, for the sake of our psychic health, to be freed from", discovering "that unmasking arbitrariness in others may always be a defence against uncovering it in ourselves" (72).

The central *characters* of modern society (the aesthete, the therapist and the manager, the bureaucratic expert) embody emotivist modes in their behaviour and they substantially trade and cannot escape trading in moral fictions. Alongside the moral fictions of rights and utility, traded in by both the aesthete and the therapist, stands "the peculiarly managerial fiction embodied in the claim to possess systematic effectiveness in controlling certain aspects of social reality" (74). Managers are often viewed by themselves and others as "morally neutral characters whose skills enable them to devise the most efficient means of achieving whatever end is proposed." But the claim that effectiveness is a morally neutral value must be rejected:

For the whole concept of effectiveness is... inseparable from a mode of human existence in which the contrivance of means is in central part the manipulation of human beings into compliant patterns of behaviour; and it is by appeal to his own effectiveness in this respect that the manager claims authority within the manipulative mode (74).

There is an underlying "belief that managerial authority and power are justified because managers possess an ability to put skills and knowledge to work in the service of achieving certain ends" (75). MacIntyre proposes that this effectiveness "is part of a masquerade of social control rather than a reality" and that it is a quality that rarely exists apart from the imputation of effectiveness to managers and bureaucrats by themselves and others. While MacIntyre recognizes "expertise" in many areas (e.g. biochemistry of insulin, historical scholarship, the study of antique furniture) he

contends that managerial and bureaucratic expertise is a moral fiction, "because the kind of knowledge which would be required to sustain it does not exist" (75). MacIntyre sees little difference between the way a desired effect might follow the deployment of imputed organizational skill and power and the way a clergyman might be fortunate enough to pray for rain just before the end of a drought. He sees the deployment of the concept of managerial effectiveness as a social and political attempt to disguise this reality. That this is so is evidenced by the fact "that its use presupposes knowledge claims which cannot be made good" (76).

It was the argument of Carnap and Ayer "that metaphysical assertions more generally and religious assertions more particularly, while they purport to give information about a transcendent reality, actually do no more than express the feelings and attitudes of those who utter them" (76). MacIntyre suggests that "managerial effectiveness" functions just as Carnap and Ayer thought "God" functions. Carnap and Ayer made their claim because they believed in "the lack of the appropriate kind of rational justification for belief in God." MacIntyre proposes that "interpretation of managerial effectiveness in the same way lack the appropriate kind of rational justification" (76).

Not only is "an emotivist account... both true of, and embodied in, a very great deal of our moral utterance and practice", with "much of that utterance and practice [being] a trading in moral fictions (such as those of utility and rights)" (76), but, arguably, the most culturally powerful fiction of them all is the claim to effectiveness and thus authority made by the central character of the modern social drama, the bureaucratic manager. MacIntyre believes that to "a disturbing extent our morality [is] disclosed as a theatre of illusions" (77).

If the claim to managerial effectiveness was not a moral fiction then its foundational claim would stand up to scrutiny, namely the "claim to possess a stock of knowledge by means of which organizations and social structures can be molded." This would presuppose that such knowledge included "a set of factual law-like generalizations which would enable the manager to predict, if an event or state of affairs of a certain type were to occur or to be brought about, some other event or state of affairs of some specific kind would result."

Consequently, the manager's claims to justified authority involves (1) "the existence of a domain of morally neutral fact about which the manager is to be expert"; (2) the law-like generalizations and their applications to particular cases derived from the study of this domain" (77). But there is now an apparent division between fact and value since, during the late 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, what were then considered to be factual premises were held not to entail what were then considered to be evaluative or moral conclusions. But this hiatus is not "merely a matter of the way in which value and morality came to be reconceived" (78). It was further reinforced by "a changed and changing conception of fact", which must be examined before assessing "the modern manager's claim to possession of the kind of knowledge which would justify his authority" (78).