Review Essay

ON AFTER VIRTUE


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Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* provides a critique of contemporary moral philosophy and relates this critique to an analysis of the moral condition of everyday life. In his emphasis on the history of moral theory, the relationship between moral philosophy and social science, and the importance given to the role of narrative in articulating an adequate moral point of view, MacIntyre's work differs significantly from that of recent moral theorists such as Rawls and Nozick.

MacIntyre critiques the traditions of moral philosophy, from Kant to Rawls, and offers a unique and intriguing account of their limitations. He argues that at the basis of the fragmentation and moral confusion of contemporary life is a breakdown, not just of morality, but of moral language itself. We are confused not simply about what we ought to do in any particular instance, we are also confounded about what, if anything, would constitute a morally persuasive argument. Moral language has lost the institutional context and the shared conceptual scheme which originally provided its meaning. With our moral language wrenched from the context in which its meaning was developed, we are left with fragments of the original and once meaningful moral scheme, fragments which provide but an appearance of shared meaning. However, this disruption has been so total that we incorrectly perceive the fragments to be a meaningful and unified whole and we continue to act as if there indeed exists some universal moral order which anyone in his or her right mind should be able to recognize and be willing to acknowledge. The only problem is that because we are oblivious to the destruction that has occurred, each of us appeals to a different fragment of the sundered unity.
At its extreme, according to MacIntyre, such fragmentation results in an emotivist ethics that views every value judgment as simply a statement of individual preferences, and a Weberian sociology that restricts rational deliberation only to questions of means. Yet, for MacIntyre, emotivism properly understood is not really a philosophical position about the nature of moral statements. It is, instead, an expression of the moral decline which characterizes contemporary life. It is, as he says, best seen as an “empirical thesis . . . about those who continue to use moral . . . expressions, as if they were governed by objective and impersonal criteria, when all grasp of such criterion has been lost.” (p. 17). The emotivist thesis is presented as affirming the grounds of that decline – that is, it assumes that there can be no rational standards for judgment other than individual, personal tastes.

For MacIntyre, emotivism should be understood both as a commentary on contemporary life and as a reflection of that life. As a reflection it is most clearly mirrored in the form of social life found in bureaucratic organizations. Emotivism denies the essential categories distinctive to moral discussions and bureaucracies. For example, the distinction between manipulated and nonmanipulated forms of behavior is obliterated by the emotivist position, and it is the minimizing of this distinction which enables bureaucracies to flourish. For MacIntyre, Weber is the key figure in understanding this relationship between philosophy and contemporary forms of social life. Weber’s thought “embodies just those dichotomies which emotivism embodies, and obliterates just those distinctions to which emotivism has to be blind” (pp. 24–25).

It is bureaucratic morality that constitutes one of the major fragments into which the moral order has been broken. Here the “moral” order is characterized by competition for scarce means that are to be placed in the service of pre-established ends (p. 24). However, about ends, no reasons are to be given. The bureaucratic manager provides us with one of the characteristic personifications of contemporary society. The manager serves as a key model of contemporary morality, and embodies one side of the emotivist distinction between rational and non-rational discourse. “The Best and the Brightest” were not just models of bureaucratic efficiency. They were also models of contemporary rationality – and of course its limitations.

If, in the obliteration of the distinction between manipulated and non-manipulated behavior, the manager represents one of the significant character models of contemporary culture, the therapist represents another. Whereas the manager follows the emotivist in obliterating this distinction at the social level, the therapist negates the distinction on the personal level. As MacIntyre observes: