

## The Emotivist Challenge

According to Alasdair MacIntyre, the “interminable” moral disputes we face today signal the ascendancy of emotivism: “Emotivism is the doctrine that all evaluative judgments and more specifically all moral judgments are nothing but expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling, insofar as they are moral or evaluative in character” (AV:11).<sup>1</sup> This view infects our moral discourse—covertly. Underlying this discourse lurks a conceptual schizophrenia: we still use traditional moral language despite having abandoned the social and historical contexts that once—but no longer—lent its animating terms univocal normative content. Accordingly, while words such as ‘justice’ and ‘virtue’ haunt contemporary moral discourse, they cannot function as they once did, as impersonal evaluative standards. Absent that functionality, our fragmented moral discourse leaves us unable to secure rational practical agreements.

That confusion, for example, drives our seemingly endless disputes over the appropriate principles of distributive justice. Liberals and communitarians, utility theorists and libertarians, all invoke a common terminology, while using that terminology’s definitive concepts, ‘justice’ and ‘merit,’ differently. Worse still, these positions propose different normative standards while presupposing that resolving disagreements among them requires reference to shared, impersonal standards. Such standards, these cognitivist theories maintain, distinguish irresolvable disputes about preferences from moral disputes that are rationally adjudicable. MacIntyre shares this view: “The particular link between the context of utterance and the force of reason-giving which always holds in the case of expressions of personal preferences or desire is severed in the case of moral and other evaluative utterances” (AV:9).

For emotivists, however, contemporary theorists' evident failure to identify such universal normative standards indicates that that link remains: "For what emotivism asserts is in central part that there can be no valid rational justification for any claims that objective and impersonal moral standards exist and hence that there are no such standards" (AV:18). Yet that conclusion follows only from emotivists' ahistoricism. According to MacIntyre, the moral terms contemporary theorists have inherited "were originally at home in larger totalities of theory and practice in which they enjoyed a role and function supplied by contexts of which they have now been deprived" (AV:10). Emotivists lack that recognition, believing—falsely—that current moral disputes are irresolvable because all moral disputes are rationally interminable: "What I have suggested to be the case by and large about our own culture—that in moral argument the apparent assertion of principles functions as a mask for expressions of personal preference—is what emotivism takes to be universally the case" (AV:18).

Yet emotivism is neither a viable theoretical position nor an accurate depiction of moral discourse. Its apparent cogency results from a series of theoretical transitions that systematically stripped moral evaluation of its objective normative force. Accordingly he seeks both to show how emotivism gains force historically, and to restore the normative contexts from which traditional moral claims were illicitly wrested. The roots of emotivism MacIntyre locates in the Enlightenment. Enlightenment theorists largely agreed upon a set of moral precepts and the form their rational vindication would take. They proposed to justify those precepts by arguing from factual premises about human nature to the moral principles that nature implied. Their efforts failed, however, because these theorists rejected any teleological conception linking moral precepts to humans' factual nature: "All reject any teleological view of human nature, any view of man as having an essence which defines his true end" (AV:52).

Reenforcing this rejection were those theorists who claimed that moral oughts could not derive from factual premises. Such a view was fatal to the Enlightenment moral project:

Since the whole point of ethics is to enable man to pass from his present state to his true end, the elimination of any notion of essential human nature and with it the abandonment of any notion of a telos leaves behind a moral scheme composed of two remaining elements whose relationship becomes quite unclear. (AV:52)

Moreover, the claim that moral oughts cannot be derived from factual sources evinces an elementary logical mistake.<sup>2</sup> That claim, MacIntyre maintains, expresses not a timeless logical truth but a consequence of overthrowing teleological modes of understanding. Such understanding underlies arguments of a particular is-ought form, those including functional concepts. These concepts define their objects, for example, watches, by reference not to their parts or operative principles but to their functions or uses. Functional concepts allow us to factually evaluate objects as good according to how well such objects work.

And in the tradition MacIntyre takes to predate our current moral confusion, “man” is a functional concept: “Within this tradition moral and evaluative statements can be called true or false in precisely the way in which all other factual statements can be so called” (AV:57). Enlightenment theorists, rushing to overthrow all teleological references, dis severed human nature and moral precepts, rendering ambiguous the latter’s prescriptive relation to the former: “But once the notion of essential human purposes or functions disappears from morality, it begins to appear implausible to treat moral judgments as factual statements” (AV:57). Indeed, he suggests, unraveling that teleological linkage undercuts any possibility of factually vindicating normative claims.

### **MacIntyre’s Alternative: The Virtue Tradition**

To restore a factual vindication of normative authority, MacIntyre proposes to reconstruct a teleological ethic consonant with the Aristotelean and Thomist conceptions of moral enquiry. Thereby he aims to reinstitute a normative context affording moral claims adjudicable evaluative content. His account, he claims, links moral evaluation and the explanation of particular actions such that agents’ actions are morally evaluable, as for emotivists such actions are not. That linkage underlies the Aristotelean conception of practical rationality that locates evaluative concepts such as ‘justice’ within a teleological cosmology. Such a cosmology supplies an arché or set of first principles delimiting the human telos:

Those archai, if correctly formulated, will furnish us with the first principles for the explanation of how and why human enterprises and activities are better or worse at achieving those goods

which provide them with their telos, and they will do so precisely by formulating adequately an account of those goods and their place in or relationship to the good and the best. (WJ:92)<sup>3</sup>

This arché, MacIntyre claims, orders human goods and their relation to the Good, specifying standards of human excellence. Agents exemplify those standards through their performance of practices:

By a 'practice' I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realised in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended. (AV:175)

Practices are not techniques for pursuing extrinsic goods. They exhibit a "unique regard" for their own internal goods and for the extension of human powers they permit (AV:180). That extension requires practitioners to internalize the objective standards defining mastery of the practices they pursue. MacIntyre grants that practices' standards are not immune to criticism. Nevertheless he argues, novices must accept as authoritative guides the best standards thus far achieved if they are to master and advance their practices. This necessity precludes emotivist pretensions: "In the realm of practices the authority of both goods and standards operates in such a way as to rule out all subjectivist and emotivist analyses of judgment" (AV:177).

New members master practices, MacIntyre maintains, by absorbing the impersonal standards practices uphold for evaluating participants' performances. Using chess as an analogue, MacIntyre describes how novice players internalize the objective standards defining mastery of this activity. They acquire expertise by modeling their play after that of exemplary players and by submitting themselves to requirements independent of their preferences. They do so, for example, by crediting others' evaluations of their progress, by accepting instruction, and by eliminating their weaknesses. More importantly, MacIntyre argues, novices' efforts to advance their expertise demand also that they increasingly embody the virtues—among them justice, courage, and honesty—which progressively integrate them into the broader cultural practices according such

terms their widest normative force: “A virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods” (AV:178).

The goods practices accrue and the virtues they encourage must be contextualized to function normatively. Apart from the narrative unity of an agent’s life and that life’s residence in a shared telos transcending and unifying individual practices, agents could specify neither why particular activities require particular virtues, nor why some activities should be valued more than others. Virtues’ normative functions, MacIntyre insists, cannot be specified apart from their inferences across an agent’s life “conceived and evaluated as a whole” (AV:190–91). That integral life presupposes a narrative history causally ordering an agent’s intentions and actions according to their role in the agent’s history (AV:193–94). Such narratives render human actions evaluable and human agents accountable for their narratives.

For MacIntyre, moral agents are “storytellers whose stories aspire to truth” (AV:201). Agents exhibit that aspiration as they nest their narratives in a shared tradition. Just as an individual life’s constancy embodies that life’s moral unity, so that unity inhabits a broader view of the good life. To pursue such a life agents must engage in practices which secure internal goods, extend human powers, and develop virtues. Thereby agents assume residence in a living tradition, a historically extended social argument about the goods and virtues constituting that tradition: “The good life for man is the life spent in seeking for the good life for man, and the virtues necessary for the seeking are those which will enable us to understand what more and what else the good life for man is” (AV:204).

To that end, practical rationality conforms these deliberations to teleological standards hierarchizing and integrating human goods (WJ:131). Agents can realize the good life only when their actions aim at the intrinsic goods that practices reap and only when those activities evoke and sustain virtues. If no hierarchy of goods obtained, agents could give no reasons for pursuing some practices rather than others, nor could they accord any particular conception of the good life’s requisite virtues univocal authority. To exercise such virtues, agents must understand both the hierarchy of goods the human telos specifies and their roles within that hierarchy. That localization enjoins agents to develop that telos’ requisite virtues through practices which aim to realize its consonant goods, such that all agents’ pursuits are oriented toward the Good (WJ:110–18).

### The Enlightenment Legacy

Only when agents share a conception of the good life, MacIntyre maintains, as they did in the Aristotelean polis, can they rationally agree upon the relative merits of different activities and goods. Yet, he maintains, the contemporary liberal state—the emotivist’s natural habitat—embodies a conception of practical rationality that precludes social consensus. Its interminable disagreements result inevitably from its Enlightenment inheritances. Enlightenment theorists sought to provide a political, moral, and legal framework whose neutral standards would permit disparate goods to coexist. To that end Enlightenment theorists eschewed tradition-dependent principles, instead premising their normative claims either upon moral truths evident to all rational agents, or upon procedural principles of right conduct (WJ:332):

Initially the liberal claim was to provide a political, legal, and economic framework in which assent to one and the same set of rationally justifiable principles would enable those who espouse widely different and incompatible conceptions of the good life for human beings to live together peaceably within the same society, enjoying the same political status and engaging in the same economic relationships. (WJ:335–36)

Their variegated efforts, however, specified the intuitions and facts underlying those principles differently, precluding neutral factual appeals to resolve competing claims. Additionally, the contending positions offered neither an uncontested account of what criteria a tradition-independent morality should satisfy, nor any neutral criteria for adjudicating those claims. Moreover, their project’s aim was from the start not neutral, as it required heteronomous goods to coexist, forbidding any conception of practical rationality which sought to advance a single, overriding Good:

Every individual is to be equally free to propose and to live by whatever conception of the good he or she pleases . . . unless that conception of the good involves reshaping the life of the rest of the community in accordance with it. Any conception of the human good according to which, for example, it is the duty of government to educate the members of the community morally, so that they come to live out that conception of the good . . . will be proscribed. (WJ:336)

Such a political and cultural order makes individuals' pursuit of disparate interests and preferences its highest good. Accordingly, the normative principles it offers will not socially order human goods but will encourage agents to pursue their individual preferences. Moreover, as it will commend no hierarchy of preferences, agents will have no reasons for ordering their preferences in one way rather than another:

The heterogeneity is such that no overall ordering of goods is possible. And to be educated into the culture of a liberal social order is, therefore, characteristically to become the kind of person to whom it appears normal that a variety of goods should be pursued, each appropriate to its own sphere, with no overall good supplying any overall unity to life. (WJ:337)

On this view, MacIntyre claims, practical reasoning allows agents not to evaluate their preferences but merely to translate them into decisions and actions aimed at satisfying individual wants. That process debases moral discourse and practice because it permits no rational resolution among preferred activities and ends. As no univocal hierarchy of preferences obtains, agents cannot identify true normative premises, thus cannot rationally resolve their disputes. Such social orders render moral discourse merely rhetorical, expressing not agents' impersonal, rational judgments but individuals' attitudes, feelings, and choices.

Within this context contemporary agents can neither evaluate moral situations nor render their own or others' activities intelligible. The premodern agent has its moral life constituted for it by its roles, obligations, and practices. These social strictures afford both a shared teleology and the impersonal standards by which that agent can evaluate human practices and goods. In contrast:

The specifically modern self, the self that I have called emotivist, finds no limits set to that on which it may pass judgment for such limits could only derive from rational criteria for evaluation and, as we have seen, the emotivist self lacks any such criteria. Everything may be criticized from whatever standpoint the self has adopted, including the self's choice of standpoint to adopt. (AV:30)

Modern theorists no longer tie moral agency essentially to the roles, obligations, and practices one assumes: "Anyone and everyone can thus



be a moral agent, since it is in the self and not in social roles or practices that moral agency has to be located" (AV:30). This account liberates the modern agent from traditional social bonds. Yet it does so at a price:

But from this it follows that the emotivist self can have no rational history in its transitions from one state of moral commitment to another. Inner conflicts are for it necessarily a fond the confrontation of one contingent arbitrariness by another. (AV:30–31)

### The Thomist Synthesis

According to MacIntyre, Enlightenment theorists maintained that rational debate, adequately conducted, embodied universal normative standards any rational person would assent to. Such assent would eliminate moral judgments' reference to traditional authorities. Practical progress, these theorists maintained, required liberating agents from the irrational prohibitions of the moral traditions they had inherited. That task was best served by presenting practical rationality not as historically embodied but as a function of universally evident procedural principles (TRV:172–77).<sup>4</sup>

Their failure to univocally justify any such principles, however, engendered the familiar attacks launched against Enlightenment moralists by Nietzsche and his genealogical progeny. For Nietzsche the fate of the Enlightenment moralists was the fate of all moralists: their truth claims were riddled with unrecognized motives serving unacknowledged purposes. There is, Nietzsche insisted, no moral truth and no moral progress. Rather, such concepts mask the moralists' will-to-truth, a will inseparable from their will-to-power. These themes, developed by Nietzsche's successors, such as Foucault, depicted moral orders not as unfolding rational traditions but as confluences of power aiming to preserve their hegemony (TRV:53).

Yet even if these genealogical analyses accurately depict Enlightenment theorists' legacy, MacIntyre claims, their methods have serious flaws. Nietzsche's perspectivism, maintaining that practical claims embody truth only from their animating perspectives, should deny its own truth claims as it does those of competing perspectives (TRV:35–42). Moreover, lacking such a shared theoretical context, Nietzsche like Foucault can have no audience (TRV:55–57). More importantly, their methods fatally misunderstand how narrative functions in constructing



practical rationality. The genealogists claim that their analyses betray a succession not of rational traditions but of wills-to-power. Modern moralities might exhibit such disarray, MacIntyre grants. But they do so because they reject the premodern traditions that alone sustain a shared conception of the human good, depriving agents of any intelligible context amid which to locate normative claims (TRV:193–95).

His genealogical rivals, MacIntyre claims, contrast their conception of practical rationalities as representing masked power interests with the Enlightenment's view of practical rationality as a universal, proceduralist enterprise. Yet that contrast omits the Thomist conception of practical enquiry qua craft. On this account enquirers fulfill practical enquiry's telos by apprenticing themselves to its masters and cultivating the virtues such enquiry embodies. In thus apprenticing oneself one opposes both the Enlightenment injunction to think for oneself and the genealogical suspicion of authority. Instead, one reenacts practical enquiry's history to understand how its standards come to secure legitimate authority. According to MacIntyre, Aquinas exemplifies this conduct of moral enquiry as historical narrative. By drawing upon Aquinas' example, he suggests, we can come to recognize how the Thomist conception of moral enquiry is superior to its contemporary competitors (TRV:79–81).

Aquinas' central task, MacIntyre maintains, was to merge the Aristotelean and Augustinian traditions he inherited. From Augustine he took over a theistic moral psychology depicting God as the source of all practical intelligibility. While proper instruction can orient human minds toward that intelligibility and the timeless normative standards it embodies, the human will is a perverse and countervailing force. As those standards are available only to those whose minds are illumined by God, faith in authority precedes rational understanding, which is attainable only through divine grace (TRV:84). For Aristotle, in contrast, human intelligence is adequate to the objects of practical rationality. Accordingly, Aristotle affirms both practical reason's independence of theology and the identity of virtue with natural rather than revealed knowledge.

Aquinas faced the challenge of integrating these accounts despite their different standards of rationality and their distinct theoretical and practical aims (TRV:101–16). To resolve these positions, MacIntyre maintains, Aquinas referred them jointly toward the common reality to which they pointed, the metaphysical ground that Augustine's and Aristotle's accounts shared. That ground, MacIntyre maintains, was best characterized as 'God,' the theological mechanism even Aristotle's cos-

mology called for as its underlying principle of unity. Positing such a ground as the foundation of his enquiry supplied Aquinas a common framework that permitted his Aristotelean and Augustinian inheritances to complement each other, rendering their common objects more intelligible (TRV:123–26).

This approach, MacIntyre maintains, affirms Aquinas' treatment of practical enquiry as a craft and his commitment to that craft's tradition and its archai. Aquinas recognized that these traditions were by themselves metaphysically and theologically inadequate, and sought to preserve the strengths of both by constructing a more inclusive and coherent position integrating their essential intuitions. To that end he affirms with Aristotle that humans are rational animals, yet affirms with Augustine that such creatures are afflicted with perverse wills. He then articulates a mode of life wherein knowledge of God is necessary to fully apprehend the Good, and wherein one must evince faith and virtue before understanding one's commitments to that life.

In merging these traditions, Aquinas aimed to identify and advance the excellences previous enquiries had achieved, as would the exemplary practitioner of any well-ordered craft. Such crafts inhabit narrative traditions. Aquinas' account offers a narrative initiates must reenact if they are to understand why certain virtues are commended and why obedience to divine law serves the human good. Reenacting that narrative presupposes a particular kind of enquirer seeking to enter a particular community, presuppositions apart from which Aquinas' account cannot be understood. The initiate, then, reenacts a narrative presupposing certain truths about God, human nature, and morality amid which alone additional truths may be identified (TRV:132–37).

Those presuppositions circumscribe conceptions of truth, of rational justification, and of practical intelligibility wholly at odds with those of modern theorists. For Aristotle, Aquinas, Augustine, for the premodern tradition, moral enquiry aimed to actualize the mind's potential, to reveal how practical truths assume their necessary form (FP:14–15).<sup>5</sup> Such understanding, MacIntyre claims, embodies a deductive scheme hierarchically structuring its causal explanations. The best explanations yield first principles specifying causes that refer directly to a singular first cause: God. Such enquiry entails a theological referent because it aspires to unify the intelligibility, motive force, and justification of its practical claims, an intelligibility secured only by the comprehensive unity of explanation a theological system affords (FP:27–29).

### The Rationality of Traditions

To advance this enquiry, its practitioners must reenact those narratives through which its practical truths and their rational justification have come to be understood (FP:30–33). Every enquiry, MacIntyre argues, progresses toward its telos as a perfected science, uncovering those determinate goods delimiting its particular mode of life. Yet modern theorists, MacIntyre maintains, thoroughly reject this conception of rational enquiry as embodied in and developed by reference to tradition. The teleological concepts such enquiry presupposes are defensible only in a universe including determinate ends by which individual purposes can be ordered. Absent such an arche, the modern moral project dissolves human agency into a heteronomous array of purposes issuing from individual interests, desires, and decisions. Lacking determinate ends, any singular hierarchy comes to be seen as invented or chosen rather than as discovered, hence as devoid of the normative authority by which it might claim to guide agents toward the fulfillment of a given telos.

Yet that lack of a determinate telos, MacIntyre claims, is not, as his genealogical rivals suggest, the universal moral situation we face. Rather it issues from the Enlightenment's misguided project. This fault line between contemporary Thomists and genealogists, signifying their disparate judgments upon the Enlightenment's abortive project, underscores how MacIntyre aims to show the Thomist position to be superior to its contemporary rivals. MacIntyre maintains that to understand an enquiry one must understand its narrative history, a narrative that can only be told in one way. Absent such a determinate accounting, no tradition could vindicate itself; indeed, it would betray inconsistencies even in self-narration. Accordingly, he suggests, the account he proposes proves superior to its contemporary rivals in part because it explains these rivals as consequences of the failed Enlightenment project, rendering the history of practical enquiry more intelligible than do these rival accounts (FP:48–51).

The Enlightenment legacy, MacIntyre maintains, culminates in the emotivist view that no tradition is rationally superior to any other, dooming individuals to the relativism and perspectivism that emotivism portends. According to the relativist, the logical incompatibility and incommensurability of practical claims reign across competing traditions, undercutting agents' ability to choose rationally among them "if the only available standards of rationality are those made available by

and within traditions, then no issue between contending traditions is rationally decidable" (WJ:352). The perspectivist, seeing competing traditions not as logically incompatible but as complementary, denies the possibility of particular traditions harboring true claims:

[T]he perspectivist challenge puts in question the possibility of making truth claims from within any one tradition. For if there is a multiplicity of rival traditions . . . that very fact entails that no one tradition can offer those outside it good reasons for excluding the theses of its rivals. Yet if this is so . . . no one tradition can deny legitimacy to its rivals. (WJ:352)

Yet both positions, he maintains, fail to recognize the rationality of traditions. The rationality implicit in practical enquiry, MacIntyre claims, develops through four stages. Enquirers begin by accepting their tradition's beliefs, institutions, and practices. That acceptance confers authority upon certain voices and texts. Those texts and voices, however, inevitably confront questions raised by novel interpretations, internal incoherencies, and new social challenges. To address such challenges, the tradition's adherents reformulate the framework either by using its internal resources, or by inventing novel resources, or by borrowing resources from rival traditions.

Practical traditions thereby develop and test their adequacy dialectically, moving toward a coherence whose successive claims more closely approximate a final, adequate position. Such traditions counter the dissolution of their historical certitudes by inventing or discovering or borrowing concepts and principles that systematically and coherently explain why the tradition's previous claims proved inadequate and how they may be improved. These enquiries thereby delimit that tradition's historically warranted assertability standards; standards, however, which are invariably conditioned by the mind's adequation to its objects (WJ:357-64):

The concept of warranted assertability always has application only at some particular time and place in respect of standards then prevailing. . . . The concept of truth, however, is timeless. To claim that some thesis is true is not only to claim for all possible times and places that it cannot be shown to fail to correspond to reality . . . but also that the mind which expresses its thought in that thesis is in fact adequate to its object. (WJ:363)

According to MacIntyre, practical rationality inhabits a personal and social narrative presupposing that practical truths are discoverable about one's own life and its relations to the Good. Those truths render one's actions intelligible, accountable, evaluable, and thereby befitting a rational moral agent. That agency requires that one be educated into a community of systematic rational enquiry, reenacting those narratives that teach one how to evaluate practical activities and goods. Such communities presuppose shared traditions of understanding and evaluation that recognize practical truths both as independent of and as embodied within those traditions (WJ:196–203).

These enquiries, MacIntyre argues, falsify relativist and perspectivist objections to the rationality of moral traditions, undercutting the contemporary recourse to emotivism. Relativists insist that a tradition's claims are always vindicated from within. In contrast, MacIntyre claims, challenged traditions may recognize rival traditions as possible material for correcting their shortcomings. In such cases, if the borrowed materials permit the borrowing tradition to understand how to resolve its practical problems, the borrowing tradition will be forced to acknowledge the rival's rational superiority. The relativist claim that traditions cannot prove themselves rationally superior, then, also proves false (WJ:364–67).

The rationality of traditions, maintaining that practical truths inhabit their constituent traditions, also defeats the perspectivist challenge. The perspectivist maintains that no claim from within one tradition can falsify claims advanced from other traditions. Yet to adopt one standpoint, MacIntyre maintains, precludes adopting others because it commits one to a view of truth and falsity. The perspectivist, refusing any such commitment, admits no conception of truth adequate to systematic rational enquiry, and is thus excluded from rational debate (WJ:368). Accordingly, MacIntyre concludes, neither perspectivism nor relativism are defensible positions. Rather they represent the vestiges of an emotivist recourse itself bereft of rational justification.