

Practical Rationality and Moral Education in Alasdair MacIntyre's Thought

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Introduction

Alasdair MacIntyre is a prominent contemporary neo-Aristotelian moral and political philosopher. He is a major critic of the Enlightenment and modernity, particularly as it appears in Kant's philosophy. Kant held that there is *a priori* method for discerning moral duties, which he called categorical imperative.

Kant believed in a faculty in human beings that is capable of producing universally binding moral ideas; for instance, according to Kant, MacIntyre (1981, p.45) maintains, "It is of the essence of reason that it lays down principles which are universal, categorical and internally consistent. Hence a rational morality will lay down principles, which both can and ought to be held by all men, independent of circumstances and conditions, and which could consistently be obeyed by every rational agent on every occasion". Thus, Kant holds a negative view about the relation between practical rationality and human interests and attachments. In his view, human beings should adopt a neutral stance in identifying moral duties, using pure practical rationality. This is clear in Kant's formulation of the categorical imperative: "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law (Kant, 1785, 4:421)". This universality test requires us to discard our particular notion of the good, interests and attachments and consider if a maxim can be consistently willed by all reasonable agents.

MacIntyre, on the contrary, holds that there is no practical reasoning capacity for human beings independent of his training and upbringing in moral traditions. Human beings should acquire moral virtues by following moral exemplars before being able to reason about them. MacIntyre's position here approaches the virtue ethics view, which emphasizes the role of moral training and habituation in acquiring the capacity for practical reasoning. Moral education can lead us to know how to morally judge in practical situations. An abstract formulation of moral rules, in a Kantian fashion, does not let us know how to correctly apply these rules; for example, we do not know when to tell truth, when to be silent, and when to justifiably tell lies. This concrete moral knowledge is obtained only through life in traditions and the virtues which are achieved through this life. However, we should note that, for MacIntyre, this does not lead to moral relativism; in other words, the fact that traditions constitute our practical reasoning does not mean that what every tradition teaches us in this regard is true. This is a difficult position to hold. In the present articles, I will explain MacIntyre's view

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regarding the relationship between practical reasoning and the virtues, and how it is different from moral relativism.

Discussion

MacIntyre, from an Aristotelian perspective, holds there is a relation between practical rationality and the virtues. That MacIntyre takes practical rationality itself as an intellectual virtue, which is *phronesis*, points to this relation. To spell out this issue better, let us consider what MacIntyre means by a virtue.

For MacIntyre, following Aristotle, virtues are dispositions not only to act but also to feel in a particular way. Virtuous action is not, as understood by Kant in MacIntyre's interpretation, acting independently of our inclinations; rather, it requires the transformation of these inclinations such that the agent moves toward his good and the good on the basis of his cultivated desires (1981, p.149). This means that the virtues constitute and affect practical rationality by taming the desires. The process of taming desires occurs in an apprentice/master relationship. Intellectual virtues like wisdom, intelligence and prudence are acquired through teaching; moral virtues or the virtues of character like courage and justice are acquired by practice and habituation (1966, p.64; 1981, p.154). Aristotle (*NE*², II.1) explains the relation between the virtues and habits as follows:

Virtue, then, being of two kinds, intellectual and moral, intellectual virtue in the main owes both its birth and its growth to teaching (for which reason it requires experience and time), while moral virtue comes about as a result of habit, whence also its name (*ethike*) is one that is formed by a slight variation from the word *ethos* (habit). ... Neither by nature, then, nor contrary to nature do the virtues arise in us; rather we are adapted by nature to receive them, and are made perfect by habit.

The role of habituation in the development of the virtues is evident in the above passage. In Aristotle's view, practical rationality is a kind of virtue that, like other virtues, cannot be reduced to rule-following behaviour. It is not possible to design some rules such as Kant's categorical imperative to designate an action as practically rational (1981, p.236).

From this Aristotelian perspective, a novice learns how to act justly, in part from others, in a particular situation, and repeats his just actions in order to develop in himself the habit of behaving justly; he can then figure out the unarticulated principles of justice in his particular actions (1988, pp.92-93). By fathoming the unarticulated principles of right action gained through the habit of right-doing the agent might become able to apply these principles to other particular non-experienced cases. The habit of right action might lead to the virtue of *phronesis*, i.e. the knowledge of what to do in particular situations, and since in Aristotle's view right action is a subset of the good, it might result in a better knowledge of the good (1988, p.92).

In Aristotle's view, MacIntyre (2006a, pp.3-4) maintains, "practical habituation in the exercise of the virtues has to precede education in moral theory." Only those who

² *Nicomachean Ethics*

have acquired good habits are able “to theorize well about issues of practice.” Only the practically intelligent human being, in Aristotle’s view, can judge the mean in any particular situation. Such a person does not have any external criterion to guide him, but he himself is “the standard of right judgment, passion, and action.” Even true theoretical moral judgments are only accessible to the good human being. These judgments, unlike theories in the physical sciences, require more than intellectual virtues, and require participation in particular kinds of moral and political practices (2006a, p.4).

In practical reasoning, unlike theoretical enquiries, we do not start with “some partly articulated highly general conception of that end that can be stated in propositional form.” Rather, we begin with the directedness of our action, which we find firstly by our nature, and then by habituation toward some ends. Our disagreements with others on moral issues prompt us to investigate into the nature of the habits and the education that we have acquired so far, and to provide resources to remove inadequacies (2006b, p.75). From Aristotle’s perspective, MacIntyre (2011, p.11) maintains, rational arguments with those who do not have the required formed character is not useful. On this basis, Aristotle holds, it is impossible to teach politics and ethics to the young.

There is a dialectical relation between the knowledge of the good and the knowledge of right action. What we take to be right in a particular situation, on the one hand, is reinforced by our notion of the good and the good life, and on the other hand, the exercise of practical rationality in particular situations strengthens our notion of the good (1988, pp.117-118).

The intellectual virtue of *phronesis* is achieved by moral virtues and the habit of undertaking right actions, which in turn depends on our performing right actions in particular situations. The habit of acting rightly in particular cases is developed through apprenticeship and learning from others. Therefore, an agent apart from an appropriate community, in Aristotle’s terms a *polis*, lacks the capacity for practical rationality, since he lacks the opportunity to become initiated into the life and the education of the virtues, and he cannot cultivate the principles of right and virtuous action. Without these principles, he cannot exercise his capacity of practical rationality (1988, pp.122-123).

This view of practical reasoning, which heavily relies on the notion of following exemplars, is at odds with the Kantian view of morality which sees in Aristotle’s view of morality a circularity; as Kant holds “Even the Holy One of the Gospel must first be compared with our ideal of moral perfection before he is cognized as such” (Kant [1785]1996, Sec. 4:409, p.63). By contrast from an Aristotelian perspective, practical reasoning and theoretical reflection on the nature of moral concepts are conducted retrospectively. An agent experiencing righteous performance in a particular situation, and learning from others what morality requires him to do can later understand what the good at stake is in that situation. Using a dialectical method that moves between the experience of moral conduct and his partial conception of the good, he would be able to formulate the first principles, *archai*, of his practical rationality. Accordingly, the dialectical method does not start from first principles; rather, it arrives finally at such principles (1988, p.100).

A novice is not able at the outset to understand the rationality of moral actions, since his untutored passions and desires impede him from understanding the relation of these actions and feelings to the good. Accepting the authority of moral masters lets him educate and harmonize his passions. In the first stages of the moral life, he acts

according to moral principles with an incentive to please others around him, who are experienced in matters of morality. After acquiring sufficient moral education, he passes from mere conformity to moral principles to achieving moral virtues and grasping the logic of moral principles. Only at this stage is the agent experienced enough to understand and present a rational justification for moral principles and moral virtues (1988, pp.114-115).

Becoming an independent practical reasoner is a process that starts from agents acknowledging their dependence on others. Agents are dependent on others not only for their physical and psychological needs but also for the formation of a process that eventually results in their independent practical reasoning. Children as incompetent moral agents act so as to please their mothers and those around them. It is the role of good mothers and good parents as immediate moral instructors to teach children that if they really want to please them, they should act according to the good, whether it pleases their elders or not (1999, p.84).

The acknowledgment of dependence on others has a crucial role in achieving independence in practical reasoning. In this process, the external reasons for actions such as pleasing others would turn into internal reasons by transforming desires and directing them to the good. Moral and intellectual virtues are qualities a novice needs to develop in this process (1999, p.87). Because of this transformation, a well-trained agent does not act morally out of confrontation with his desires; rather, he finds moral conduct agreeable and enjoyable (1999, p.88). In the course of this development, he learns how to separate himself from his desires, and to evaluate, revise and if necessary replace them according to his notion of the good. In doing so, he has surpassed the animal condition of simply having reasons for action, and has developed in its place a human capability of evaluating and modifying those reasons (1999, p.91).

MacIntyre, emphasizing the role of moral education, refers to moral errors, besides intellectual mistakes, as sources of flawed practical reasoning. Some vices like insufficient sensitivity to others' sufferings or hatred of others might impede us from separating ourselves from our passions and according other people their due in the process of practical rationality. The best protections from these two kinds of errors, i.e. intellectual and moral, are found in friendship and collegiality. Our friends and colleagues can help us detect our intellectual and moral mistakes, and keep us on the right track in the process toward becoming an independent practical reasoner (1999, p.96).

These remarks show that we should learn to become virtuous in moral traditions prior to being able to construct a practical rationality that informs us of the point of being virtuous, and of the goods which are at stake in moral conduct, because there are some elements, the virtues, that precede practical rationality. This view relates MacIntyre to virtue-ethics.

A quotation from another proponent of virtue-ethics and virtue-epistemology might shed light on MacIntyre's approach here. J. McDowell (1979, pp.331-332) explains the role of the virtues in practical reasoning in terms of the reliable sensitivity that they cause. He argues that a kind person or a virtuous person in general has "a reliable sensitivity" to the requirements of kindness in particular situations, letting him know when and how to behave kindly. The kind person has a "perceptual capacity", yielding him the knowledge of the requirements of kindness in particular cases. In other words,

having the virtues gives the agent a perceptual capability to recognize if a given situation requires behaving according to one virtue or another. This knowledge is not reducible to the application of the rules of moral action. McDowell, on this basis, opposes principle-based ethics, and argues that “should statements” cannot function as reasons for justifying an obligation; rather, we need appropriate specific considerations to support these statements (McDowell 1978, p.14).

One feature of Aristotle’s account of practical rationality related to the role of the virtues and apprenticeship is that agents rely on each other in practical reasoning about important issues (*NE*, 1112b, 10-11, in A. MacIntyre (1999, p.107)). In this view, MacIntyre contends that a collective questioning and answering about the good often takes place prior to individual deliberation. Practical reasoning is a collective and social enterprise in which agents reason with each other. An agent needs to engage in different social relations to achieve his own conception of the good in order to be qualified later as an independent practical reasoner (1999, p.107).

MacIntyre also explains his idea of virtue-based practical rationality by describing moral philosophy as a craft. He takes this view in his criticism of the Enlightenment and its heirs in the 19th century. In MacIntyre’s view, the Enlightenment’s approach faced the following problem. The procedures of practical rationality, like Kant’s categorical imperative, designed to distinguish moral from immoral action are not exclusively the products of a universal practical rationality; rather, some elements of traditional values are present in what is assumed to be rationally right (1981, p.43). In other words, the procedures and the tests of practical rationality apply only retrospectively to sets of conduct, in the sense that agents do not employ these procedures empty-heartedly to determine what actions are morally right or wrong; rather, the particularity of agents’ lives would impact on the procedures adopted by them, and it is not the case that as Kant ([1785] 1996, Sec.4:389, p.45) assumes “the ground of obligation here must not be sought in the nature of the human being or in the circumstances of the world in which he is placed, but *a priori* simply in the concepts of pure reason.” MacIntyre argues to the contrary that “Kant never doubted for a moment that the maxims which he had learnt from his own virtuous parents were those which had to be vindicated by a rational test. Thus the content of Kant’s morality was conservative” (1981, p.44).

In MacIntyre’s view, the conservative and particular elements present in agents’ moral lives play a significant role in constituting the structure of their practical rationality. This contention is at the heart of MacIntyre’s notion of tradition-constituted rationalities. The procedures of practical rationality are designed, whether we know this or not, to meet the demands of particular moral attitudes. In other words, the Enlightenment’s moral philosophers like others have had some moral and intellectual virtues informing their notion of practical rationality. What Kant took to be a test for moral actions tacitly presupposed what was right according to his inherited Pietist Lutheran morality. If we take these characters and inclinations away, in MacIntyre’s view, Kant’s moral test of consistent universalizability would include as moral some non-moral or amoral principles:

It is very easy to see that many immoral and trivial non-moral maxims are vindicated by Kant’s test quite as convincingly—in some cases more convincingly—than the moral maxims which Kant aspires to uphold. So ‘Keep all your promises throughout your entire life except one’,

‘Persecute all those who hold false religious beliefs’ and ‘Always eat mussels on Mondays in March’ will all pass Kant’s test, for all can be consistently universalized (1981, pp.45-46).

MacIntyre holds that Kant has tried to give substance to this formal moral test by adopting the view that morality enjoins treating others as ends in themselves. However, in MacIntyre’s view, the formal criterion of morality does not logically necessitate such a content. It is, rather, possible to treat others as instruments without flouting the formal criterion of consistent universalizability; for instance, an egoistic person can consistently will that all people except him be treated as a means (1981, p.46).

In my view, if we consider Kant’s account of the good, which consists in the intrinsic dignity of human beings as a guiding principle of morality, then MacIntyre’s criticism loses its point, as Kant’s approach is not purely formal. Based on this point, the egoistic person in MacIntyre’s example is not acting morally even if he can will consistently to treat others as means, because by doing so he is taking other human beings as means and not as ends in themselves. However, I cannot here enter into discussion about Kant’s moral theory, and restrict myself to MacIntyre’s presentation of Kant’s theory.

The contrasting view espoused by MacIntyre is that of philosophy, including moral philosophy, as a craft. What distinguishes the craft-view of moral enquiry and philosophy from the Enlightenment’s and 19th century Encyclopaedist’s perspective is two-fold. First, there is the role of apprenticeship in a craft. Second, there is the role of intellectual and moral virtues in exercising practical rationality and understanding moral concepts.

While the Encyclopaedists and the Enlightenment philosophers began with the rejection of authority and the adoption of an individual-centred epistemology, the craft-view emphasizes the role of authority and traineeship in obtaining knowledge. This relationship assists an apprentice to distinguish a genuine good from a seeming good, and also what is good for him based on his training level from what is good without qualification (1990, p.61).

In MacIntyre’s view, the relationship between virtue and practical rationality can resolve the dilemmas that one meets in, for example, Plato’s Meno paradox. The Meno paradox of practical rationality is the dilemma that either we know something or we do not. If we know it, then what would be the point of enquiry, and if we do not know it, the question would be how it is possible to undertake enquiry about it, and how we can ensure that we have achieved the truth.

In response, MacIntyre holds that unless we have the potentiality of moving toward particular theoretical and practical conclusions, we would be unable to learn. These potentialities are capacities for acquiring moral and intellectual virtues; also, we need a trainer to teach us what habits of mind and character to have, and how to develop them (1990, pp. 63&130).

The craft-view of moral enquiry emphasizes the existence of pre-rational elements that “initially” are not open to rational scrutiny, and which constitute the structure of practical rationality. In the craft-view, the authority of the masters and virtues into which the apprentice is initiated are not the subjects of practical reasoning; as MacIntyre writes:

The intending reader has to have inculcated into him or herself certain attitudes and dispositions, certain virtues, *before* he or she can know why these are to be accounted virtues. So a pre-

rational reordering of the self has to occur before the reader can have an adequate standard by which to judge what is a good reason and what is not. And this reordering requires obedient trust, not only in the authority of this particular teacher, but in that of the whole tradition of interpretative commentary into which that teacher had had earlier him or herself to be initiated through his or her reordering and conversion (1990, pp.82-83).

This account of practical rationality, which emphasizes the role of the virtues, denotes the Augustinian aspect of MacIntyre's thought; this view, however, in some respects conflicts with the democratic and fallibilistic aspects of MacIntyre's thought in which he argues, for instance, that a flourishing rational community should be a local one in which it is possible to put office-holders and the citizens to question by each other in order to arrive at a common mind (1998, p.248)³, or that "corrigibility and refutability are necessary properties of any theory for which truth can be claimed" (2006d, p.187). The conflict is that the virtue-elements would surely put some limitations on the scope of questioning, as the virtuous might ask the novices to first become virtuous in order to understand the wisdom of their actions. The knowledge that is at the disposal of the virtuous cannot be easily revised or refuted by other people; the knowledge which has some character formation as its backdrop does not easily change upon the disclosure of its inadequacies. To modify this problem, I used above the qualification that the novice-master relationship is not "initially" open to revision, which means when the novice becomes experienced enough he can challenge the master. This modification can to some extent solve the problem, as it ideally allows revision at the later stages of apprenticeship.

In contrast with this craft-view, in the Enlightenment's account, there should be rational grounds for agents' adoption of these initial elements. Agents should exert autonomous rationality and be able to reflect on the initial context in which they happen to reason; whereas in MacIntyre's view, the practical rationality of these prior constituting elements is not recognizable by everyone; only a just person can recognize the justice of a given state of affairs; as MacIntyre (1988, p.106) states, "on Aristotle's view it is impossible generally to judge consistently aright concerning a particular virtue without possessing the virtue".

According to the tradition-constituted account of rationality explained above, the background given by a tradition provides the possibility for an agent to reason based on these starting-points. These points can serve their part as the starting premises of practical rationality if they are inculcated into an agent as intellectual and moral virtues. Hence, in MacIntyre's view, there is no way to start a practical syllogism from self-justificatory and convincing-for-all first principles (1988, pp.251-252).

It is important to note here that MacIntyre's emphasis on the significance of communities, and his referring to the idea of the "justice of a *polis*" (1988, p.34) in post-Homeric Greece are not intended to have relativistic implications. Arguing about different meanings of the virtues in different Greek cities, MacIntyre (1988, p.79) is against the relativistic and the sophistic view that every claim is inevitably from a point of view. However, MacIntyre's constitution thesis⁴ and his view that "progress in

³ MacIntyre (2006c, p.213) uses the expression "rational local community" to describe such a community.

⁴ I mean the fact that rationality is traditionally constituted.

rationality is achieved only from a point of view” might suggest the same sophistic point (1988, p.144).

MacIntyre, on the one hand, denies this relativistic understanding, which is evident in his rejection of the reduction of the idea of truth to warranted assertibility in traditions (1988, p.363), and on the other hand, denies the possibility of leaving aside all one-sided points of view in enquiries (1988, p.80). To resolve this tension, I would suggest that, in MacIntyre’s account, we start from contingent partial points of view; however, the outcomes of our enquiries can compete with each other, and the one(s) which survives challenges would be rationally superior (1988, p.388). As MacIntyre puts it, “each of these stages [of progress in enquiries] will have been marked both by less and less partial insight and yet also by a continuing one-sidedness” (1988, p.80).

Accordingly, I think M. Nussbaum’s criticism of MacIntyre based on her interpretation of Aristotle is not correct, because MacIntyre is not espousing moral relativism. Nussbaum’s point is as follows.

Aristotle does not believe that people need to seek arguments to justify their beliefs only from within each single local tradition. He considers ideas from Persia and Sparta, from Cyme and Athens, all in an attempt to construct an account of the good life for any and every human being (M. Nussbaum 1989, p.41).

Neither does MacIntyre believe that rational justification should only be sought from within a single tradition, as rational accounts provided from each tradition should compete with others to check which one is more adequate. MacIntyre’s point is that justification is inevitably from a point of view, but justified beliefs should compete with others to see which one is more adequate in terms of explanatory capacity, consistency, etc.

Conclusion

MacIntyre in his moral philosophy tries to hold two views: 1- moral and practical reasoning is a capacity which is gradually acquired in practical lives of traditions. Its theoretical foundations are outlined only *a posteriori*; 2- This view does not lead to moral relativism, because traditions should compete with each other to see whose moral account is superior. However, I think MacIntyre faces difficulties here, because there should be independent standards for the evaluation of moral traditions. Each tradition might see itself superior to other traditions, unless standards are used which are independently valid; and this is something which MacIntyre seems to deny: “the conclusion of the preceding chapter was that it is an illusion to suppose that there is some neutral standing ground, some locus for rationality as such, which can afford rational resources sufficient for enquiry independent of all traditions” (1988, p.367). Without the existence of some tradition-independent measures of practical rationality, inter-traditional intellectual and moral encounter does not fully make sense. However, the emphasis which MacIntyre lays on moral tradition and master-novice relationship is insightful. This view can be used as a foundation for a kind of the philosophy of education which the modern life needs in order to overcome the crises caused by extreme emphasis on autonomy and individualism.

Resources

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