

Historicism without Relativism?

Alasdair MacIntyre's Proposal for the Rescue of Moral Imperativeness

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In his "Postscript to the second edition" of *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre observes that a "historicist theory of knowledge" is "presupposed by the argumentative narrative" of the book (271).^{1,2} The kind of historicism he has in mind is conceived in reference to the discussions generated by Kant's doctrine of the Categorical Imperative. On MacIntyre's view, "Hegel and subsequent historicists" were right in claiming that "morality which is no particular society's morality is to be found nowhere." Kant's allegedly "universal and necessary principles of the human mind" are in fact "principles specific to particular times, places and stages of human activity and enquiry." In his moral philosophy, principles and presuppositions that were supposed to define "morality as such" defined indeed just "one highly specific morality, a secularized version of Protestantism which furnished modern liberal individualism with one of its founding charters"

¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1981; second corrected edition with Postscript, 1985). All the page numbers mentioned with brackets inside the text refer to *After Virtue* (1-263) or to its Postscript (264-278) in the second edition.

² This essay presents an expanded version of a paper pronounced at a "Colloquium on Relativism" organized with Catharina Stenqvist and Patrik Fridlund in Höör (7-9 May 2010). It has greatly benefited from the discussion that followed; I owe a special debt of gratitude to Dr. Pamela Sue Anderson, Regent's Park College, Oxford, for her thoughtful suggestions.

(265-266). Is this MacIntyre's last word about Kant's conception of moral imperativeness?

In her influential essay "Kant after Virtue" (1984), Onora O'Neill suggests that MacIntyre's "aim in cutting back the pretensions of modern moral thought is not to fall into any sort of moral relativism" but to restore the conditions of "intelligible action" in terms that she holds to be compatible with the spirit, if not the letter, of Kant's ethics.³ O'Neill argues that Kant's moral philosophy—if rightly construed—"includes an account of practical reasoning that is highly relevant to MacIntyre's project."⁴ O'Neill's un-

³ Onora O'Neill, "Kant after virtue", originally published in *Inquiry*, 26 (1984), 387-405. Republished with a postscript as Chapter eight, 145-162, in *Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant's Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1989), 145-146.

⁴ O'Neill, 148. O'Neill's central proposal is that "Kant offers primarily an ethic of virtue rather than an ethic of rules" (154). Though in her 1989 Postscript she finds it retrospectively "misleading" to portray Kant "as offering an ethic of virtue because he insists on the priority of principles over their outward expression" (161), O'Neill's initial thesis has greatly contributed to the development of a renewed attention to the theme of virtue in Kant's work (see, for example, Robert Louden, "Kant's Virtue Ethics", *Philosophy*, 61 (1986), 473-89; George R. Lucas, "Agency after Virtue", *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 28 (1988), 293-311; and *Kant's Ethics of Virtue* (ed. Monika Betzler; Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruy-

common way of relating MacIntyre to Kant rests on the assumption that historicism can be disconnected from relativism. Whether this assumption is justified remains a controversial issue among MacIntyre's interpreters, but his own response to the question is unmistakably positive. The present essay aims at identifying the arguments that enable MacIntyre to dismiss relativism, not despite his commitment to historicism, but in the very name of it. The first part examines how he expects to keep historicism clear from relativism by means of his epistemological insights into the rationality of traditions. The second part suggests that MacIntyre's historicism reaches even beyond these epistemological issues: if history matters and makes a differ-

ence in his account of the moral life, it is not just because, as a matter of fact, all our concepts, moral or not, are historically conditioned; it is much more because, as a matter of ought, the substance of the "good" we are meant to pursue is required to remain open to historical change at the threefold level of practice, individual life, and tradition. The third and concluding part critically follows the path opened by O'Neill: it argues that MacIntyre's historicism is mainly directed against emotivist forms of relativism and that it might be construed – in his very own terms – as a neo-Aristotelian refurbishing of Kant's doctrine of the Categorical Imperative.

1. Relativism and the rationality of traditions

In his 1985 Postscript to *After Virtue*, MacIntyre notes that a historicist account of philosophical history becomes inconsistent as soon as it is brought to completion in some "absolute knowledge" whose rational superiority cannot be affirmed without some surreptitious appeal to non-historical standards. While this critique of the delusive notion of an "absolute knowledge" refers primarily to Hegel, MacIntyre points out that it applies to his own retrieval of Aristotle's moral philosophy as well. The "achievement" that he ascribes to "Aristotle's moral scheme" is not that it offers a final theory whose rational justification would be "invulnerable to objections." It is rather that it provides "the best theory to emerge so far in the history of this class of theories." MacIntyre's historicism entails, so he admits, that no *a priori* argument can guarantee that a better theory will not emerge from a new historical situation; the possibility must be left open that "some new challenge to the established best theory so far will appear and will displace it" (270). MacIntyre goes as far as to grant that a new historical situation could eventually provide new "positive grounds" for some renewed version of the "relativistic thesis" or a "successful resuscitation of the Kantian transcendental project" (277). He underscores thereby that his own conception "of historicism, unlike Hegel's, involves a form of fallibilism." In other words, "it

ter), 2008). By suggesting that "Kant lies further away from us than his conventional status as arch-Enlightener suggests" (161), O'Neill has opened new ways of asking "what MacIntyre's work might contribute to the refurbishing of Kantian ethics" and, even more, "what Kant's ethics can offer to MacIntyre's refurbishing of Aristotelian ethics" (148): Kant's "modernity", she says, "lies in his rejection of a conception of human nature and its telos that is sufficiently determinate to yield an entire ethic. But just on this point MacIntyre too is modern" (161). O'Neill rightly describes MacIntyre as "committed to an open-ended, almost procedural vision of the human telos," which is "closer to post-Enlightenment conceptions of human nature as inherently intelligent and rational, yet otherwise open, than it is to Aristotle's more determinate conception of human nature" (146). "Further," she argues, the less determinate, but formal and rational, conception of human nature on which Kant relies is sufficient for the grounding of at least some fundamental maxims of virtue. Kant offers us a form of rationalism in ethics that (despite the unfortunate suggestions of some of his examples) does not generate a unique moral code, but still both provides fundamental guidelines and suggests the types of reasoning by which we might see how to introduce these guidelines into the lives we actually lead" (161). Symmetrically, it should be noticed, MacIntyre is certainly not advocating an ethics of virtues conceived as an exclusive alternative to an ethics of rules. As David Solomon observes, "MacIntyre gives rules a central place and returns to the topic of the place of rules in the adequate theory repeatedly" ("MacIntyre and Contemporary Moral philosophy", 114-151 in *Alasdair MacIntyre* (ed. Mark. C. Murphy; Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003), 131).

is a kind of historicism which excludes all claims to absolute knowledge” (270).

As Robert Stern has observed, MacIntyre’s historicism seems bound to collapse into relativism if we are to accept Hilary Putnam’s classical account of the ambivalence of rationality in Hegel’s legacy.⁵ Putnam argues that “Hegel contributed two formative ideas to our culture, ideas between which there is some tension.” On the one hand, Hegel showed all conceptions of rationality to be “historically conditioned;” on the other, he “postulated an objective notion of rationality which we (or Absolute Mind) were coming to possess with the fulfilment of the progressive social and intellectual reforms which were already taking place.” According to Putnam, those “who accept the first Hegelian idea, that our conceptions are all historically conditioned, while rejecting the idea of an end (or even an ideal limit) to the process, tend to become historical or cultural relativists.”⁶ Stern argues that “MacIntyre’s strategy does offer a way out of Putnam’s conundrum” (“how can the historicist avoid relativism without being a full-fledged Hegelian?”) by showing that historical progress can be appraised as a “transcending of limitations” with an “objective, rational evaluative standard,” even though such a progress could never “coherently” be considered “final.”⁷ Other commentators are more sceptical about the possibility to prevent MacIntyre’s historicism from sliding into relativism.⁸ Gordon Graham, for example, doubts that “MacIntyre’s subversion of the philosophical/historical distinction is

any more successful than Hegel’s.”⁹ Arguing that “MacIntyre’s project” will only succeed if he allows philosophy—rather than history—to “take the lead in telling historical stories,” Graham observes that “to conclude in this way is to call for more, not less Hegelianism.”¹⁰

In his Prologue to the third edition of *After Virtue* (2007), MacIntyre shows a clear awareness of the reasons that have led—and still lead—some of his readers to draw relativist conclusions from his historicist theory of knowledge.

What historical enquiry discloses is the situatedness of all enquiry, the extent to which what are taken to be the standards of truth and of rational justification in the context of practice vary from one time and place to another. If one adds to that disclosure, as I have done, a denial that there are available to any rational agent whatsoever standards of truth and of rational justification such that appeal to them could be sufficient to resolve fundamental moral, scientific, or metaphysical disputes in a conclusive way, then it may seem that an accusation of relativism has been invited.¹¹

MacIntyre admits that the word “accusation” might be inaccurate here, since he has also been acclaimed for his alleged relativism “by those who have tried to claim [him] as a postmodernist.”¹² But in any case, he maintains that historicism, as he understands it, entails neither the relativist proposition that “to conclude this rather than that” can never be “rational as such” but only “relative to the standards of some particular tradition,”¹³ nor the corollary claim that no tradition might suffer “rational defeat at the hands of another.”¹⁴

⁵ Robert Stern, “MacIntyre and Historicism”, 146-160 in *After MacIntyre: Critical Perspectives on the Work of Alasdair MacIntyre* (eds. John Horton and Susan Mendus; Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), 146.

⁶ Hilary Putnam, “Beyond Historicism”, 287-303 in *Realism and Reason: Philosophical Papers, Volume 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983), 287-8, quoted in Stern, 146.

⁷ Stern, 157.

⁸ See, among others, John Haldane, *Faithful Reason: Essays Catholic and philosophical* (London/New York: Routledge, 2004), 19-20; Gordon Graham, “MacIntyre on History and Philosophy”, 10-37, in Mark C. Murphy, 34.

⁹ Gordon Graham, “MacIntyre’s Fusion of History and Philosophy”, 161-175 in *After MacIntyre*, 163.

¹⁰ Graham, “MacIntyre’s Fusion of History and Philosophy”, 174.

¹¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, “Prologue: After Virtue after a Quarter of Century”, ix-xvi in *After Virtue*, Third Edition (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), xii.

¹² MacIntyre, “Prologue”, xii.

¹³ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 352.

¹⁴ MacIntyre, “Prologue”, xiv.

His most comprehensive discussion of this topic is to be found in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* There he suggests that any issue can become rationally decidable even among alien traditions separated from each other by untranslatable languages-in-use providing their own standards of reasoning and their own background beliefs. While he rejects the modern faith in irresistible translatability—even under the austere vesture of Donald Davidson’s principle of charity¹⁵—MacIntyre argues that those who live in a given tradition can acquire the language-in-use of an alien tradition as a second first language and are thereby enabled to identify and explain “the limitations, incoherencies, and poverty of resources of their own beliefs” with insights not available “from within their own tradition.” As a result, he concludes,

the only rational way for the adherents of any tradition to approach intellectually, culturally, and linguistically alien rivals is one that allows for the possibility that in one or more areas the other may be rationally superior to it in respect precisely of that in the alien tradition which it cannot as yet comprehend.¹⁶

In many cases, to be sure, the issues on which contending traditions disagree “may remain undecided.” Yet, on MacIntyre’s account, the sheer possibility that “such issues can on occasion be decided” suffice to show “the falsity of relativism.”¹⁷

MacIntyre’s defence of historicism opens a twofold polemical front. While on the one front he strongly dissociates himself from what he describes as a relativist misreading of his historicist proposal, on the other he distances himself in equally strong terms from what he calls the “academic orthodoxy” of analytic philosophy. Responding to William K. Frankena’s claim that

“historical enquiry” is useless in moral philosophy since the “methods of analytic philosophy” are efficient enough “to establish what is true or false and what it is reasonable to believe (269), MacIntyre portrays the promoters of such conceptions of the nature and task of analytic philosophy as inheriting from their “Kantian forebears” the delusive confidence that arguments can be scrutinized “in abstraction from the social and historical contexts of activity and enquiry in which they are or were at home” (267).

Notice a clear shift of emphasis in MacIntyre’s treatment of the key notions of universality and particularity, dependently on whether he struggles on the front of abstract and ahistorical universalism—“in its eighteenth-century Kantian form or in the presentation of some modern analytic moral philosophies” (221)—or on the opposite front of cultural and historical relativism: in the former case, he tends to underline the embodiment of our moral enquiries in particular histories and particular social groups; in the latter, he rather stresses their concrete universal aim to transcend the limitations of such particularities. On MacIntyre’s view, these two requirements define the scope and limit of our rational investigations into the good. As he puts it in *After Virtue*,

the fact that the self has to find its moral identity in and through its membership in communities such as those of the family, the neighbourhood, the city and the tribe does not entail that the self has to accept the moral *limitations* of the particularity of those forms of community. Without those moral particularities to begin from there would never be anywhere to begin; but it is in moving forward from such particularity that the search for the good, for the universal, consists (221).

Practical reason can neither obliterate the particularity of its social and historical context of enquiry, nor can it merely be locked up within such contextual boundaries. While upholding that there is no such a thing as a “realm of entirely universal maxims” into which one could escape (221), MacIntyre still describes the “search for the good” in terms of a “moving forward” from the particular to the universal. The tension involved in these conflicting claims may be resolved, so he suggests, if the “moving forward”

¹⁵ See Marc Boss, “On the Very Ideas of Commensurability and Translation : Alasdair MacIntyre *contra* Donald Davidson”, 129-147 in *Plural Voices: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Interreligious Issues* (eds. Patrik Fridlund, Lucie Kaennel and Catharina Stenqvist; Leuven: Peeters, 2009), 130-133.

¹⁶ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 387-8.

¹⁷ MacIntyre, “Prologue”, xiv.

itself remains thoroughly conditioned by the constraints of historical existence: it will always involve “both identity and change through time, expression in institutionalized practice as well as in discourse, interaction and interrelationship with a variety of forms of activity” (265). This is how MacIntyre maintains the concrete and yet ambitious task of practical reason both against an ahistorical universalism claiming that common moral standards must be available to all rational beings and against a historical relativism asserting that questions of rational superiority can never be settled among rival moral traditions. If moral arguments must not be abstracted from the historical encounters out of which they develop, it is precisely because their rational relevance cannot be appraised apart from such concrete encounters with “particular rivals in some specific contexts” (269).

2. What the good is all about: an open-ended question

Political appraisals of MacIntyre’s work are inclined to underscore his call for a substantive conception of the good so as to contrast it with procedural forms of contemporary liberalism¹⁸. Yet, interestingly enough, MacIntyre seems more concerned with urging *that* our moral life needs to be oriented toward a substantive concept of the good than with making plain *what* the good’s substance is supposed to be. It is not that he simply neglects to address the question. It is rather that his response remains deliberately open-ended. MacIntyre’s unrelenting commitment toward historicism cannot be dissociated from this open-ended conception of the good. Historicism, as he understands it, is not simply

the inescapable conclusion to which epistemological sobriety commands to surrender. MacIntyre’s historicism entails a highly prescriptive moment. His account of the time-bound, provisional, character of our definitions of the good says less about what *is* than it says about what *ought to be*.

MacIntyre’s insistence on the historical embedment of our definitions of the good is undoubtedly at odds with Aristotle’s ahistorical account of the good. But the moral tradition he claims to retrieve in *After Virtue* and in his subsequent works explicitly includes the significant revisions brought to Aristotle’s thought by his medieval interpreters. Among these revisions, MacIntyre gives central value to what he describes as a narrative and historical reading of Aristotle’s ethics of the virtues. Since Aristotle himself could not believe that “the telling of stories has a key part in educating us into the virtues,” the task of incorporating his virtue ethics into a narrative and historical scheme could only be accomplished by those of his successors “whose biblical culture has educated them to think historically” (147). MacIntyre sees a “genuine advance” (180) and a “unique achievement” (180) in this merging accomplished within medieval aristotelianism between a rationally thinking tradition inherited from Aristotle and a historically thinking tradition inherited from the Bible. To “think historically” about the virtues means to acknowledge—as a blessing, not as a curse—that our conceptions of the good are bound to remain open-ended since they take place in a story that is yet to be completed. In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre develops this theme at each of the three “stages” he identifies in his “account of the virtues” (273).

The first stage “concerns virtues as qualities necessary to achieve the goods internal to practices” (273). Sciences, arts, games or crafts provide numerous examples of social practices in which the pursuit of excellence can serve as a pattern for the pursuit of the good in the moral life. In response to the objection that great chess players might be highly skilled in their practice without being virtuous in any moral sense of the word, MacIntyre grants that we can plausibly imagine a skilled chess player caring only about winning and about the various rewards attached

¹⁸ On these political issues, which remain outside the epistemological focus of this paper, see Marc Boss, “What’s Wrong with ‘Communitarianism’? A Liberal Appraisal of Alasdair MacIntyre’s Ethics of Virtue”, *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift*, Årgång 85, 3/2009, 130-141; *id.* “Religion versus Liberalism? Alasdair MacIntyre’s Hyperdemocratic Critique of Liberal Democracy”, in *Constellations of Value: European Perspectives on the Intersections of Religions, Politics and Society* (ed. Christoph Jedan, Berlin: Lit, 2013), 91-107.

to victory. But he observes that such a player would in fact not attain excellence in the relevant sense insofar as he or she would not be pursuing goods internal to the practice of chess. If an “immensely skilled player” cares only about external goods, what he achieves, on MacIntyre’s view, “is not that kind of excellence which is specific to chess and the kind of enjoyment that supervenes upon such excellence, a good which far less skilled players may at their own level achieve” (274). As their name suggests, the goods “internal” to a given practice can only be acquired from inside this practice. Now, to enter into a practice is to enter into a relationship “with the past it embodies” and to confront its authority. By learning from the previous achievements of a practice we learn how to contribute to those achievements that are still to come. What needs to be stressed in this account of the moral significance of practices is that it entails an open-ended definition of the good: if practices change for the better, it is not only for the reason that technical skills increase, but it is also because the very “conceptions” of the “goods and ends” they want to pursue “are transformed and enriched by these extensions of human powers.” It is therefore not fortuitous, MacIntyre argues, “that every practice has its own history and a history which is more and other than that of the improvement of the relevant technical skills.” He describes this “historical dimension” as “crucial in relation to the virtues” insofar as practices “never have a goal or goals fixed for all time.” In painting or physics, for example, “the goals themselves” do gradually change as they are “transmuted by the history of the activity” (193-194). So does the good that is to be pursued as the *telos* of human life.

At the second stage, which he describes as the stage of “the narrative order of a single human life” (187), MacIntyre appreciates the historical open-endedness of our definitions of the human good in the light of the “medieval conception of a quest.” Such a quest, he argues, “is not at all a search for something already adequately characterized, as miners search for gold or geologists for oil.” It allows for no predetermined conception of the good that is to be pursued; the goal of the quest could not even be recognized apart from the quest itself. “It is in the course of the

quest and only through encountering and coping with the various particular harms, dangers, temptations and distractions which provide any quest with its episodes and incidents that the goal of the quest is finally to be understood.” Such an undetermined conception of the good that we are to pursue entails an equally undetermined conclusion about the good life that we are to live: “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” (219). Commenting on this statement, Jeffrey Stout suggests that MacIntyre has certainly exasperated some of his readers in obstinately refusing “to supply an antecedently known, yet substantive and detailed, conception of the good” as “something we first know, capture in a theory, and then pursue.”¹⁹

As he comes to the third stage of his account of the virtues—which concerns the traditions providing “both practices and individual lives with their necessary historical context” (223)—MacIntyre explains the political implications of his open-ended definition of the good. “We are apt to be misled,” he says, “by the ideological uses to which the concept of tradition has been put by conservative political theorists” (221). Appropriating Edmund Burke’s apology of tradition as a safeguard against rational instability and conflict, these theorists fail to recognise that

all reasoning takes place within the context of some traditional mode of thought, transcending through criticism and invention the limitations of what had hitherto been reasoned in that tradition (222).

In other words, they do not see that stability and lack of conflict only characterize traditions that are dead or about to die. “A living tradition,” so MacIntyre argues,

¹⁹ Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics After Babel. The Languages of Morals and their Discontents* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988; second edition with a new postscript, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), 237-238.

is an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition (222).

Just like the goods towards which practices are oriented or the goods pursued in a single human life, the goods constituting living traditions remain subject to a provisional definition insofar as they cannot be viewed as fixed goals derived once and for all from a pre-established conception of the human essence. A living tradition is indeed “always partially constituted by an argument about the goods the pursuit of which gives to that tradition its particular point and purpose” (222). This can be observed, for example, in the traditions informing educational, agricultural or medical practices and their corresponding institutions. In each of these examples

common life will be partly, but in a centrally important way, constituted by a continuous argument as to what a university is and ought to be or what good farming is or what good medicine is (222).

When traditions are alive, they always “embody continuities of conflict” (222). This understanding of tradition as a “not-yet-completed narrative” (223) has hardly anything to do with the “nostalgia” or “idealising of the past” that is so often ascribed to MacIntyre.²⁰ Though he will later amend some of the views about tradition developed in *After Virtue*, he will constantly maintain—and even amplify—his characterization of living traditions as rational, deliberative, and open-ended inquiries about the goods defining their purpose and distinctiveness.²¹

²⁰ MacIntyre, “Prologue”, xi.

²¹ See Jean Porter, “Tradition in the Recent Work of Alasdair MacIntyre”, 38-69 in *Alasdair MacIntyre*, p. 43: “Although [in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* and in *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*] he drops the claim that a tradition should be seen as a quest, he does retain the sense that a tradition is centrally a kind of open-ended inquiry, rather than offering something fixed and static.”

3. MacIntyre’s historicist appraisal of moral imperativeness

MacIntyre has been portrayed as the “most modern among the anti-moderns”²² in reference to his historicist understanding of the rationality of traditions. In his essay “Confrontation des traditions et intensité de la vérité,” Denis Müller observes that MacIntyre’s critique of modernity should be labeled “metamodern” rather than merely “antimodern” in regard to the historicist justifications of his moral philosophy.²³ As Müller persuasively argues, MacIntyre’s epistemological insights – insofar as they allow for a “secular” form of rationality that excludes neither plurality nor conflict – are thoroughly incompatible with the “reactionary and authoritarian” kind of anti-modernism for which he has often been praised or blamed.²⁴ As I have persistently argued so far, patent supports for such “metamodern” construals of MacIntyre’s project are provided by the fallibilism of his theory of knowledge and the open-endedness of his definition of the good. I would like to suggest, however, that a distinction between classical enlightenment ethics and late modern moral discourse is needed if we are to do justice to the historiographical scheme implied in MacIntyre’s story of “moral decline.”

This scheme involves three distinct stages that might be roughly described as premodern, early modern, and late modern. On the premodern stage

evaluative and more especially moral theory and practice embody genuine objective and impersonal standards which provide rational justification

²² Konstantinos Chatzis, “Le plus moderne des anti-modernes: MacIntyre et la rationalité des traditions”, 311-331 in *Les études philosophiques* 1999/3.

²³ Denis Müller, “Confrontation des traditions et intensité de la vérité”, 41-60 in *Recherches de science religieuse*, 95/1, 2007. For an earlier—and, in Müller’s own words, less “charitable” (ibid., 52)—account of MacIntyre’s views on tradition and rationality, see “La rationalité des traditions et la possibilité d’une compréhension universelle. Critique des thèses d’Alasdair MacIntyre et conséquences pour l’éthique contemporaine”, 499-509 in *Laval Théologique et Philosophique* 50, 1994/3, especially 507-509.

²⁴ Müller, “Confrontation des traditions”, 59.

for particular policies, actions and judgments and which themselves in turn are susceptible of rational justification (18-19).

On the early modern stage “there are unsuccessful attempts to maintain the objectivity and impersonality of moral judgments,” while “the project of providing rational justifications both by means of and for the standards continuously breaks down.” On the late modern stage, finally,

theories of an emotivist kind secure wide implicit acceptance because of a general implicit recognition, though not in explicit theory, that claims to objectivity and impersonality cannot be made good (19).

In *Ethics after Babel*, Jeffrey Stout makes a brief but intriguing observation about the second and third stages of this scheme: while MacIntyre’s critique of “the leading figures of the Enlightenment” is always tempered by a charitable appraisal of their reasons and motivations, MacIntyre seems hardly willing “to extend such charity to his own contemporaries.”²⁵ I shall argue that these contrasted assessments of the second and third stages of MacIntyre’s scheme are in significant part determined by the sharp opposition that *After Virtue* traces between emotivism, a doctrine depicted as the most emblematic expression of late modern moral relativism, and a new, historicised, understanding of Kant’s classical doctrine of moral imperativeness.

3.1. Emotivism: an epistemic and social disease

MacIntyre’s critical assessment of emotivism stresses its lack of rational ambition and deplors its resulting openness to nonrational manipulation. Because it affirms that evaluative judgments—in contrast to factual judgments—are “*nothing but* expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling,” emotivism provides no rational way to decide whether our moral judgments are true or false. Since no persuasion can be reached with rational methods, securing an agreement is only possible “by producing cer-

tain non-rational effects on the emotions or attitudes” of whomever disagrees with our own judgments. According to this understanding of the purpose of ethics,

[w]e use moral judgments not only to express our own feelings and attitudes, but also precisely to produce such effects in others (12).

Our moral judgments have therefore a double function: they are at the same time the mask of our individual preferences and the instrument we use to change the feelings or attitudes of others.

While MacIntyre rejects emotivism’s claim to offer a universally valid theory about the true nature of moral judgments, he still sees it as a faithful reflection of how moral judgments are effectively used in the historical conditions of what he calls “the social drama of the present age” (27). This social significance of emotivist philosophy can be recognized in three social incarnations, three “characters,” as MacIntyre likes to say: the Aesthete, the Therapist and the Manager (30). Each of these “moral representatives of their culture” (28) obliterates the distinction between manipulative and non-manipulative human relationships. Illustrated by the character of Ralph Touchett in Henry James’s novel *The Portrait of a Lady*, the Aesthete’s concern,

is to fend off the kind of boredom that is so characteristic of modern leisure by contriving behavior in others that will be responsive to their wishes, that will feed their sated appetites (24).

The Therapist is equally interested in manipulating other people, though he is rather concerned

with technique, with effectiveness in transforming neurotic symptoms into directed energy, maladjusted individuals into well-adjusted ones (30).

It is however in the character of the Manager that MacIntyre sees the “dominant figure of the contemporary scene” (74). He embodies the kind “bureaucratic rationality” which Max Weber has defined as “the rationality of matching means to ends economically and efficiently” (25).

MacIntyre’s reference to the Weberian definition of bureaucratic rationality explains why he ascribes such an eminent role to the character of

²⁵ Stout, 209 and 320, note 16; see also Chatzis, 330.

the Manager. Portraying the “contemporary vision of the world” as predominantly Weberian, he suggests that it knows “of no organized movement towards power which is not bureaucratic and managerial in mode” and “of no justifications for authority which are not Weberian in form” (109). MacIntyre underscores the lack of rational justifications of this Weberian worldview, which “disguises and conceals rather than illuminates” and “depends for its power on its success at disguise and concealment” (109). The Manager owes his social legitimacy to the distinction Weber has established between power and authority. Yet, MacIntyre discerns but one reality behind these two notions. On his view, Weber remains so deeply indebted to the basic assumptions of emotivism that he can hardly give any real consistence to his famous distinction.

Weber is then, in the broader sense in which I have understood the term, an emotivist and his portrait of a bureaucratic authority is an emotivist portrait. The consequence of Weber’s emotivism is that in his thought the contrast between power and authority, although paid lip-service to, is effectively obliterated as a special instance of the disappearance of the contrast between manipulative and non-manipulative social relation (26).

In the bureaucratic structures of private corporations or government agencies, the manager’s authority is supposed to be legitimized by his effectiveness (25). His task is to imagine what would be the most appropriate means to attain some predefined end. According to MacIntyre, this very notion of effectiveness involves

a mode of human existence in which the contrivance of means is in central part the manipulation of human beings into compliant patterns of behavior” (74).

The kind of authority claimed by the manager depends precisely on how effective he can be in performing such manipulative activity (74).

The social order embodied by the Manager reproduces in its very structure the moral ambivalence of the emotivist doctrine. According to MacIntyre, “the contemporary social world” is divided “into a realm of the organizational in

which ends are taken to be given and are not available for rational scrutiny and a realm of the personal in which judgment and debate about values are central factors, but in which no rational social resolution of issues is available” (34). In these circumstances, social life can take only two antagonistic forms: “one in which the free and arbitrary choices of individuals are sovereign and one in which the bureaucracy is sovereign, precisely so that it may limit the free and arbitrary choices of individuals” (35). This conflict between individual and bureaucratic sovereignty is analyzed by MacIntyre as the social embodiment of the emotivist theory. As we seek “to protect the autonomy that we have learned to prize, we aspire ourselves *not* to be manipulated by others,” but as we seek

to incarnate our own principles and stand-point in the world of practice, we find no way open to us to do so except by directing towards others those very manipulative modes of relationship which each of us aspires to resist in our own case (68).

Just as emotivism explains moral life in terms of individual preferences and manipulative strategies, the social order that it helps to legitimize establishes a paradoxical complicity between individual freedom and bureaucratic control.

In MacIntyre’s description of this social order “bureaucracy and individualism are partners as well as antagonists” and “it is in the cultural climate of this bureaucratic individualism that the emotivist self is naturally at home” (35). This inextricably epistemic and social criticism of the nonrational and manipulative methods of emotivism forms the background of MacIntyre’s appreciative understanding of Kant’s doctrine of the Categorical Imperative.

3.2. The Categorical Imperative reassessed: a Kantian-like medication

In O’Neill’s essay “Kant after Virtue,” MacIntyre’s positive assessment of the Categorical Imperative is surprisingly overlooked. As we have noticed already, O’Neill convincingly argues that “Kant’s account of practical reasoning

has much to offer to MacIntyre's project."²⁶ She regrets, however, that the misreadings of Kant she perceives in *After Virtue* "stand in the way of a positive use" of his moral philosophy. Her thesis of a promising alliance between Kant and MacIntyre presupposes both her drastic revision of what Hegel has imposed as a standard interpretation of Kant and her claim that MacIntyre's reading of Kant is thoroughly indebted to this "venerable" interpretative tradition.²⁷ In other words, O'Neill believes MacIntyre would see Kant as an ally if—and only if—he were to read him as she does.

It seems to me that O'Neill overstates MacIntyre's hostility toward Kant's understanding of moral imperativeness insofar as she focuses upon the first formula of the Categorical Imperative, the so-called "formula of universal law" ("Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become universal law"), and deliberately leaves aside "all mention of ends-in-themselves and all discussions of the equivalence or non-equivalence of distinct formulations of the Categorical Imperative."²⁸ By neglecting the second formula of the Categorical Imperative ("Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or that of another, always at the same time as an end and never just as a means"), O'Neill ignores what MacIntyre most explicitly approves and admires in Kant's moral philosophy. In his 1998 Preface to the second edition of a *Short History of Ethics*, he argues that the second formula of the Categorical Imperative forbids any attempt to "manipulate" others "by some type of nonrational persuasion, some appeal to their inclina-

tions." Urging that this expression of the categorical imperative captures "a feature of rational moral discourse as such," MacIntyre stresses that his "doubts about Kant" have never been "about his injunction to treat persons as in this sense autonomous." His doubts, he says, "were and are about Kant's account of how moral standards are to be justified."²⁹

This understanding of the Categorical Imperative as a much-needed protection against "manipulation" or "nonrational persuasion" is already observable in *After Virtue*'s critique of emotivism. As MacIntyre describes it, emotivism involves "the obliteration of any genuine distinction between manipulative and non-manipulative social relations." It is therefore to be sharply contrasted with Kant's conception of the moral imperative. MacIntyre stresses that what makes a human relationship moral "is precisely the difference between one in which each person treats the other primarily as a means to his or her ends and one in which each treats the other as an end" (23). In *After Virtue* as in the 1998 Preface to the *Short History of Ethics*, the second formula of the categorical imperative implies that morals ultimately depends on our capacity to distinguish between manipulative and non-manipulative relations: "If emotivism is true this distinction is illusory." If our evaluative assertions are but expressions of our "own feelings or attitudes" and manifestations of our will to transform "the feelings and attitudes of others," there can be no such a thing as a categorical imperative. The "sole reality" that emotivism ascribes to moral utterance is "the attempt of one will to align the attitudes, feelings, preference and choices of another with its own." On MacIntyre's view, the moral theory of emotivism involves a turning upside down of Kant's second formula of the categorical imperative: the emotivist maxim enjoins us to always consider others as means and never as ends (24).

²⁶ O'Neill, 148.

²⁷ O'Neill, 148. According to O'Neill, MacIntyre's major mistake about Kant is that he thinks him to be "paradigmatic" of those "modern moral philosophers" who "tried to write an ethics of rules rather than an ethics of virtues" (148). She also mentions three other conventional charges against Kant that she believes to be uncritically endorsed by MacIntyre: that Kant mistakenly believes in a "unique set of moral rules for all men and all time," that his "theory lacks substantial moral implications" and, finally, that he "base[s] ethics on an impoverished conception of human reason" (149).

²⁸ O'Neill, 155-156.

²⁹ MacIntyre, "Preface", in *A Short History of Ethics. A History of Moral Philosophy from the Homeric Age to the Twentieth Century* (New York: MacMillan, 1966; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967; second edition, Routledge, 1998), xii-xiii.

Conclusion

In his “Postscript to the Second Edition” of *After Virtue*, MacIntyre admits that, within the limits of his own conceptual framework, “Kant was quite right in supposing that moral imperatives are neither imperatives of skill nor imperatives of prudence” (273). His only mistake was to assume that they needed therefore to be, “in his sense, categorical imperatives” (273). There is indeed another sense in which categorical imperatives might be understood. But such an alternative remains out of reach, MacIntyre suggests, as long as one tries “to understand the virtues outside the context of practices” (274). Although practices cannot claim for themselves the kind of intrinsic moral value that the Kantian definition of the categorical imperative ascribes to the satisfied demands of duty alone, they nonetheless “exemplify forms of activity that are good in themselves, without reference to any further aims toward which they might be directed.”³⁰ What is wrong, hence, with Kant’s moral philosophy, on MacIntyre’s view, is less

its doctrine of the categorical imperative as such than the theoretical framework in which it is embedded. Insofar as it remains structured by the means-ends distinction,” which forces to consider that “all human activities are either conducted as means to already given or decided ends or are simply worthwhile in themselves,” this framework does not allow one to take into consideration the provisional, undetermined character of the goods pursued inside the context of practices: in such “ongoing modes of human activity,” ends must be “discovered and rediscovered, and means devised to pursue them” (273). Once again, MacIntyre’s historicism informs a “metamodern” criticism of a classically modern argument. Nonetheless, the objection he addresses to Kant is remarkably restricted if we compare it with his radical dismissal of the most central tenets of emotivism. In rejecting Kant’s theoretical framework, MacIntyre upholds, in his own alternative framework, the very same appeal to a rationally justifiable form of moral imperativeness.

Summary

Alasdair MacIntyre’s historicism has been suspected of sliding inescapably into relativism insofar as it explicitly rejects all claims to final or absolute knowledge. On his own view, however, acceptance of this fallible sort of historicism is a preliminary condition for the only sort of rational universality and moral imperativeness that we can plausibly oppose to relativism. This article appraises MacIntyre’s understanding of historicism in the twofold perspective of his epistemological account of the rationality of traditions and of his moral insistence on the open-endedness of our search for the good. In critical discussion with Onora O’Neill’s distinctively Kantian assessment of *After Virtue*, it concludes that MacIntyre’s historicist refutation of relativism is mainly directed against those emotivist forms of relativism which substitute manipulation to rational discussion by claiming that “others are always means, never ends,” and that it might therefore be read as providing a renewed theoretical justification for the second formula of Kant’s Categorical Imperative.

³⁰ Jean Porter, “Tradition in the Recent Work of Alasdair MacIntyre”, p. 41.