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Citation Details

Hill, R. Kevin, "MacIntyre's Nietzsche: A Critique" (1992). *Philosophy Faculty Publications and Presentations*. 13.

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MacIntyre's Nietzsche: A Critique

In this paper I attempt to show that Alasdair MacIntyre's reading of Nietzsche in After Virtue is untenable. Such a critique both clarifies our understanding of Nietzsche and is a preliminary to a more general critique of MacIntyre. For MacIntyre, Nietzsche represents the final drawing of consequences from the Enlightenment project to found a rationally justifiable morality. First, MacIntyre takes himself to be agreeing with Nietzsche regarding the inevitable failure of the Enlightenment project. Second, MacIntyre, in rejecting Nietzsche's subsequent positive suggestions beyond this critique (which he finds intolerable) provides a basis for resurrecting a pre-Enlightenment approach to morality. I shall argue that Nietzsche is neither rejecting the Enlightenment project altogether, nor the classical tradition which it superceded; nor does he wholeheartedly endorse either of these alternatives. The possible viability of such a position casts doubt on MacIntyre's own project and his rejection of the Enlightenment tradition.

MacIntyre's argument depends on the plausibility of an hypothetical historical narrative. Once upon a time, Western societies possessed a moral life which provided attainable, satisfying goals for its members, and which was rationally defensible, i.e. the claims that this morality made on the members of society were objectively binding. Then a catastrophe occurred: certain key premises of this moral edifice were rejected; the practices which were justified by this edifice lingered on for a while. Philosophers began to see that these moral practices stood in need of a rational justification, which they attempted without recourse to the rejected premises. Such attempts had to fail, because these premises are needed to justify the practices. Subsequently, the belief that moral practices are incapable of rational justification spread as each attempt failed. Finally, the practices themselves began to die out. We now live in such a world, a nihilistic world which Nietzsche prophesied. Unless we return to the old rejected premises, we are doomed.

MacIntyre's narrative interprets this nihilism in terms of a widespread acceptance of an emotivist metaethics, but his account of emotivism differs from the versions promulgated by Ayer, Stevenson and others. Classical emotivists held that a relation of synonymy obtained

between sentences which express moral claims or demands and sentences which express pro-attitudes towards the actions enjoined in the moral claim sentence. This equivalence, MacIntyre holds, is untenable, and must be superseded in terms of a distinction between meaning and use. The moral claim sentences are used to express a pro-attitude towards the actions in question, even if they do not mean "I have a pro-attitude towards A." Insofar as moral claim sentences carry with them an implied claim to objectivity or impersonality, they are "seriously misleading" since a pro-attitude towards something cannot be objective in the required sense. Moral language influences the behavior of its auditors precisely to the degree that they mistakenly accept the apparent but non-existent objectivity of its claims. It would be more honest to abandon it. MacIntyre's Nietzsche is precisely this honest figure: the emotivist who wishes to stop concealing the manipulateness of moral language behind a screen of putative objectivity.

Part of MacIntyre's reason for making this last identification of the honest emotivist with Nietzsche is that MacIntyre holds two suppressed, unargued for, assumptions about human nature which give his account of emotivism their peculiar quality. First, there are no pro-attitudes towards the well-being of others; all human emotive dispositions are self-interested in the narrow sense. This rules out the possibility of having, for example, an anti-attitude towards murder based on finding it intrinsically repellant; the appearance of such an attitude would require for MacIntyre an explication in terms of my pro-attitude towards my not being murdered, and my pro-attitude towards institutions which further this selfish interest. Second, there is very little in the way of shared pro-attitudes because there is very little in the way of shared self-interest. MacIntyre doesn't state this anywhere, but I can see no other reason for his equation of a putatively Nietzschean war of all against all with emotivism, unless it be in terms of some such assumption. Both assumptions are quite false. We all share, for example, an anti-attitude towards nuclear war (contra assumption #2), an anti-attitude which is not reducible to each individual's desire to live (contra assumption #1). Similarly, conservationists and animal advocates often argue against human practices which cause the suffering or extinction of other animal species which is very difficult to reconcile with either of these assumptions.

Finally, MacIntyre collapses the distinction between emotivism so characterized, and the existentialist notion of criterionless choice. On the existentialist view, as on the emotivist view, the ultimate moral sentences or values are not susceptible of further justification. Because existentialists accept hard libertarianism, these ultimate pro-attitudes must be a matter of fundamental choice. We "will" these values into existence, so to speak. This last use of the word "will" facilitates MacIntyre's identification of Nietzsche's position with Sartre's. Of course, an emotivist need not be committed to hard libertarianism about ultimate attitudes. These attitudes might themselves be causally determined. MacIntyre's equation of existentialism with emotivism should be seen rather as an appending of hard libertarianism to emotivism. This move elaborates MacIntyre's assumptions about self-interest, for if correct, then the world would not be seen as a war of all against all, where the interests of these warriors are relatively determinate, but rather a war of empty wills against each other. What I should take my self-interest to consist in would itself be indeterminate.

Is Nietzsche an emotivist in the aforementioned sense? The temptation to read MacIntyre's "use" emotivism into Nietzsche is great in light of such remarks as

[to deny morality] can mean: to deny that moral judgments are based on truths.... This is my point of view.... I deny morality as I deny alchemy, that is, I deny their premises.... I also deny immorality: not that countless people feel themselves to be immoral, but that there is any true reason so to feel. It goes without saying that I do not deny--unless I am a fool--that many actions called immoral ought to be avoided and resisted, or that many called moral ought to be done and encouraged--but I think the one should be encouraged and the other avoided for other reasons than hitherto.

This passage is not decisive, since Nietzsche does not tell us here what the errors are that he takes previous moralities to be founded upon. His final remark is suggestive, insofar as he thinks that there are reasons for behaving in ways which accord with at least some of the prescriptions of previous moralities. Whether or not these reasons are of an instrumental character in relation to unjustifiable preferences remains to be seen. What is clear is that Nietzsche thinks that traditional morality gave the wrong reasons for acting in certain ways, but that better reasons for acting in at least some of these ways can be found. If Nietzsche were an emotivist, and the "bad reasons" being criticized were metaethical, then there couldn't be any good reasons of the sort referred to in the end of the passage. If the reason why traditional morality is unjustified is because there cannot be any reasons for the ultimate preferences underlying any moral reasoning, this is surely not a defect that Nietzsche could rectify, since his own moral recommendations would ultimately rest on the same defective foundation.

Nietzsche frequent reference to the value of self-control and indifference to one's

immediate feelings, regardless of their apparent moral character weighs against an emotivist reading. The theme of self-control is a common one in moral literature, but Nietzsche is unusual in stressing that one should not be impulsive even when such impulses are directed towards morally approved objects.

'Trust your feelings!' - But feelings are nothing final or original; behind feelings there stand judgments and evaluations which we inherit in the form of feelings (inclinations, aversions). The inspiration born of a feeling is the grandchild of a judgment - and often of a false judgment! - and in any event not a child of your own! To trust one's feelings - means to give more obedience to one's grandfather and grandmother and their grandparents than to the gods which are in us: our reason and our experience.

Nietzsche opposes relying on attitudes one finds in oneself towards a particular action or class of actions on the grounds that such attitudes are concealed judgments, i.e. are cognitive, though the grounds for the judgment have become invisible to us. Furthermore, Nietzsche's objection to such reliance on "feelings" rests on our propensity to not subject the judgments which lie behind them to rational scrutiny. This not only compromises our autonomy, but also may have unfortunate effects if the judgments should prove false or irrelevant. Of course, Nietzsche owes us an account of how such rational scrutiny would terminate; he may be an emotivist after all, but if he is, he is not a simple emotivist, for in any attempt to decide a moral issue, one would not only have to trace back the relevant factual questions to an apparently ultimate attitudinal ground, but one would also have to closely scrutinize these attitudes for covert cognitive content which would in turn have to be evaluated.

When Nietzsche insists that "there are altogether no moral facts" and that "there are no moral phenomena, there is only a moral interpretation of these phenomena," he is claiming that there are no irreducibly moral phenomena, that is, there are no phenomena which are moral, but not in virtue of their relation to any other axiological principle. If there are moral phenomena, they are such by virtue of their relationship to some axiological foundation in which no moral predicates occur. This view, though compatible with use-emotivism, is also compatible with all sorts of different views, including MacIntyre's. Nietzsche claims that if you take a particular act A, which we agree is moral, the fact that it is moral is reducible to and derived from the fact that it possesses some other property which is non-moral, e.g. that it is required if one's actions are to be rational, that it maximizes collective utility, that it is a condition for human flourishing to be possible, etc. Seen in this light, we can now make sense of what Nietzsche is talking about; his primary opponent is intuitionism.

I might designate the tendency of these reflections as moralistic naturalism: my task is to translate...moral values back into their nature.... Art, knowledge, morality are means: [we should] recognize in them the aim of enhancing life...

This result seems to be in harmony with MacIntyre's own interpretation of Nietzsche, insofar as MacIntyre claims that emotivism is the upshot of a rejection of intuitionism. However, it need not follow that in rejecting intuitionism, Nietzsche is moving "forward" to emotivism; in fact, he is moving backwards to the Enlightenment attempt to give reasons for being moral. Though Nietzsche rejects specific reasons in the passage from Daybreak cited above, it does not follow that Nietzsche rejects the enterprise of giving reasons.

Nietzsche rejects the Kantian claim that moral rules are unconditionally binding by virtue of their rationality. Nietzsche's objection here is that rationality should be understood as

essentially the adjustment of means to ends, and that rationality cannot in this context stipulate ends towards which actions should be directed--it can only ascertain the appropriate means by which we can attain the ends which we happen to have. This does not mean, however, that selection of ends is a matter of sheer preference. Rather, Nietzsche's view is that ultimate ends are not open to selection at all, insofar as they are "programmed" into human nature. Nietzsche's power-psychology is meant to be both a theory of the motivation for all human action and an axiological theory. As Nietzsche says, "you yourselves are also this will to power, and nothing besides," and "What is good? Everything that heightens the feeling of power in man, the will to power, power itself." Thus, it is not open to us to prefer or not prefer power; all that is variable is the modality of the pursuit of power and the degree of success. Thus, for Nietzsche, the basic question of the practical agent is not "what should I do? Should I perhaps pursue power, or some other thing?" but rather "what should I do in my pursuit of power?" Activities can be evaluated as rational or irrational to the degree that they are well matched to the given objective and circumstances the agent finds herself in. What emotivists may see as irreducible preferences, Nietzsche can regard as resting on a deeper foundation. Consequently, these "preferences" can be evaluated rationally.

Nietzsche's attitude towards the last two suggestions--that morality is justified insofar as it maximizes utility and morality is justified insofar as it promotes human flourishing--is more complex. Nietzsche does believe that much of what counts for us as moral does promote collective utility, and that if viewed in isolation from other variables, this would be a sufficient justification of it. His opposition to this justification lies not in its character or form, but in the values that it presupposes. More specifically, Nietzsche does not regard collective utility as the be-all end-all of human existence, but as itself a means to further ends. Nietzsche does confuse matters when he refers to the prescriptive canon whose purpose and justification lies in collective utility as "morality" tout court, and then goes on to profess his own "immoralism" since it is clear that Nietzsche thinks other moralities are possible and more desirable. What Nietzsche often refers to as simply "morality" or sometimes as "herd animal morality" is a set of practical rules for action which are held to be binding on all members of a society, and whose justification lies in their utility for the survival and success of the society in question. Nietzsche thinks that such a set of rules would in fact be binding on all members if and only if the survival and success of the society in question could be shown to be a value which objectively supercedes all other possible values. Nietzsche's objection, then, is not that there is no such thing as an objective value (a metaethical claim), such that the utilitarian justification fails, but rather that while the survival and success of the society is objectively valuable, there are other things which are objectively more valuable, that is, the highest possible human flourishing of a few members of the society. The survival and success of society, and the derived justification of the rules which promote it, thereby receive a second justification, insofar as the survival and success of society contributes to the highest possible human flourishing of a few members of the society. However, insofar as adherence to these rules (especially by these exceptional few) undermines their flourishing, special exceptions to the rules may need to be made to accommodate their interests. Nietzsche believes that he possesses an axiological foundation from which such systems of practical rules can be evaluated: "Under what conditions did man devise these value judgments [i.e. moral value judgments] good and evil? and what value do they themselves possess? Have they hitherto hindered or furthered human prosperity?"

Nietzsche also rejects hard libertarianism as a metaphysical doctrine, though this is seldom sufficiently appreciated. "the concept of 'sin' [was] invented along with the torture

instrument that belongs with it, the concept of 'free will,' in order to confuse the instincts, to make mistrust of the instincts second nature."

The *causa sui* is the best self-contradiction that has been conceived so far, it is a sort of rape and perversion of logic; but the extravagant pride of man has managed to entangle itself profoundly and frightfully with just this nonsense. The desire for "freedom of the will" in the superlative metaphysical sense, which still holds sway, unfortunately, in the minds of the half-educated; the desire to bear the entire and ultimate responsibility for one's actions oneself, and to absolve God, the world, ancestors, chance, and society involves nothing less than to be precisely this *causa sui* and, with more than Munchhausen's audacity, to pull oneself up into existence by the hair, out of the swamps of nothingness.

This passage alone, as well as numerous others, can be cited to show the distance between Sartre and Nietzsche on this score, and considerably undermines MacIntyre's effort to assimilate them to each other. However, it obviously raises other difficulties for my claim that Nietzsche has positive moral views of his own; it would seem that some sort of libertarianism or compatibilism is the prerequisite of having any moral views whatsoever. That Nietzsche does not endorse compatibilism is clear also, since he rejects the "I could have done otherwise" component of the standard linchpin of compatibilism, "I could have done otherwise, if I had chosen." "[this world] has a 'necessary' and 'calculable' course...every power draws its ultimate consequences at every moment." Nietzsche's determinism is another dimension of his rejection of the moral, but it does not follow from this that Nietzsche believes that evaluative consideration of actions collapses altogether. Nietzsche seeks naturalistic evaluative criteria which do not appeal to personal responsibility in the way that the tradition does. This is the source of his numerous references to "sickness" "decadence" and "ugliness" in characterizing actions (and persons) which contravene his evaluative scheme. The physiological metaphors are most prevalent when discussing that which Nietzsche judges low in value; the aesthetic metaphors generally appear when Nietzsche is discussing what he regards as high in value. These values themselves, however, Nietzsche regards as purely naturalistic, much in the same way that Bentham regards pleasure as both a natural property and a criterion of evaluation. For Nietzsche, of course, the criterion is "power" not pleasure.

Since MacIntyre's claim that Nietzsche's views are defectively ahistorical rests on the assumption that Nietzsche is an emotivist, and we have tried to show that this claim is not as solid as MacIntyre thinks, it follows that there is an open question as to whether Nietzsche's understanding of morality is ahistorical or not. Another part of MacIntyre's claim that Nietzsche lacks historical sensitivity is his view that Nietzsche misunderstood the Homeric tradition that he supposedly wished us to return to. Related to this last claim is MacIntyre's view that Nietzsche fails to grasp the social nature of morality and the impossibility of full human flourishing when the individual is abstracted and isolated from social norms, practices and institutions.

The first part of MacIntyre's claim rests on the assumption that emotivism, while a correct description of present morality, is an incorrect description of preceding moral practices, rests on specific claims about the nature of the post-Enlightenment world and the history of the preceding twenty-five hundred years of Western moral practices which we shall not examine. However, if my analysis in the preceding section is correct, while Nietzsche was not an emotivist, he certainly did believe that there is something that all moralities have in common: they are all expressions of a will to power. Does this represent a defectively ahistorical position?

Any ethical theory which hopes to be both descriptively and normatively plausible will be caught between the horns of a dilemma. To be descriptively plausible, the theory must take into account the wide diversity of activities that have been accorded honors in various cultures, and the diversity of ranking schemes these activities have been organized into. Second, the theory must appeal to some feature or features of human life which are general enough to produce an objective list and ranking of activities which will be binding on all human beings. The dilemma is that the more descriptively plausible the theory, the more empty the normative claims it may make, while the richer normative theory may be forced to condemn whole cultures out of hand as failing to match its standards.

This dilemma is clearly one to which MacIntyre's project is to some degree subject, though he is quite clearly aware of the problem. Nonetheless, he does manage to produce to his own satisfaction an account of human life and human virtue which transcends cultural relativism in the pernicious sense. Is Nietzsche not entitled to do the same? Once we have dismissed the simplistic reading of the will to power as the pursuit of satisfaction of whatever desires one happens to possess, and take into account the prominent role Nietzsche assigns to the specific form this drive takes when sublimated into a will to self-mastery, is Nietzsche's view that all moral practices everywhere involve at minimum an activity of attempting to achieve self-mastery in some form or other altogether implausible?

MacIntyre's claim that Nietzsche is ahistorical also rests on the assumption that for Nietzsche there are basically only two possible moral codes, codes which are honest about their own basis in the will to power, and codes which are not. The former encompasses the Homeric "master morality" and Nietzsche's own proposed code; the latter encompasses "slave morality" i. e. everything else in between. However, Nietzsche neither identifies his own preferred view with master morality, nor the modern view with slave morality. Both modern morality and his own proposals involve mixtures of elements from both. What differentiates the two is that modern morality, racked by internal contradictions due to its dual inheritance, seeks to minimize this discomfort by discouraging intensity of experience and activity; the confusion of values can only be maintained if people are kept at a "low boil" so to speak. But this approach, Nietzsche thinks, can only produce mediocrity and a lack of virtue. Nietzsche's own proposal involves attempting a harmonious synthesis of the best elements of both at the highest degree of intensity possible. This claim is born out by the following passages. "There are master morality and slave morality--I add immediately that in all the higher and more mixed cultures there also appear attempts at mediation between these two moralities..." What is immediately added is invariably overlooked; "higher" is virtually a technical term for Nietzsche, and the claim is explicit--a combination of master and slave morality is better than master morality alone.

In an age of disintegration...human beings have in their bodies the heritage of multiple origins, that is, opposite, and often not merely opposite, drives and value standards that fight each other and rarely permit any rest. Such human beings of late cultures...will on the average be weaker human beings: their most profound desire is that the war they are should come to an end.... But when the opposition and war in such a nature have the effect of one more charm and incentive of life--and if, moreover, in addition to his powerful and irreconcilable drives, a real mastery and subtlety in waging war against oneself, in other words, self-control, self-outwitting, has been inherited or cultivated, too--then those magical, incomprehensible, and unfathomable ones arise, those enigmatic men predestined for victory... [e. g.] Leonardo Da Vinci. They appear in precisely the

same ages when that weaker type with its desire for rest comes to the fore: both types belong together and owe their origin to the same causes [emphasis mine].

Da Vinci, an example of what Nietzsche elsewhere calls an "ubermensch" requires as his historical and social preconditions, not the ascendancy of "master morality" but "opposite drives and value standards" which is to say, a mixture of master and slave morality. From what Nietzsche says elsewhere, this was not the case in Homeric Greece; it is however, the case in modern Western societies, as he thinks is evidenced by the degree of moral conflict and confusion the modern world is experiencing. Such higher types are impossible under the regime of master morality (or indeed of slave morality either) exclusively, insofar as an exclusive regime lacks

that protection which [favors variation]; the species needs itself as a species, as something that can prevail and make itself durable by virtue of its very hardness, uniformity, and simplicity of form, in a constant fight with its neighbors or with the oppressed who are rebellious or threaten rebellion. Manifold experience teaches them to which qualities above all they owe the fact that, despite all gods and men, they are still there, that they have always triumphed: these qualities they call virtues, these virtues alone they cultivate.... In this way a type with few but very strong traits, a species of severe, warlike, prudently taciturn men, close-mouthed and closely linked (and as such possessed of the subtlest feeling for the charms and nuances of association), is fixed beyond the changing generations...

From the preceding two passages, it is clear that Nietzsche's relationship towards sociality is considerably more complex than MacIntyre allows. For it is clear that extensive prior training in a moral regime which possesses an intrinsically social character and social justification is necessary for individuals to achieve the full human flourishing which is to come later. Where Nietzsche differs from MacIntyre is in the assumption that such training (which involves both apprenticeship to given social practices and positioning of the self in relation to one's moral tradition) is both necessary and sufficient for human flourishing. For Nietzsche it is merely necessary, as human flourishing requires an element of creativity which requires the individual to place herself at some distance from these practices and tradition. "Creation of norms of one's own" in this sense is a part of Nietzsche's inheritance of the Enlightenment tradition's individualism, but it is simultaneously an innovation within the Aristotelian tradition, insofar as Nietzsche regards creativity as essential to full human flourishing. Creativity, by its very nature, cannot be a basis for legislating specific content to human activity, but it does provide a generic guideline based on putative facts about the human telos. Thus, MacIntyre's alleged radical contrast between the Enlightenment and the Aristotelian tradition appears to have broken down in Nietzsche's case, casting doubt on MacIntyre's equation of Nietzsche with the final unfolding of the liberal tradition and the supposed sharp choice that we are confronted with: Nietzsche or Aristotle?

Notes

MacIntyre, Alastair, After Virtue, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981, pp. 2-5, 22, 36-39, 49-50, 256.

Ibid., pp. 12-14, 19-21.

I am indebted to Frankena for this observation. Frankena, William K. "MacIntyre and Modern Morality," in Ethics 93 (April 1983), Chicago: University of Chicago, 1983, p. 583.

Ibid., pp. 21-22.

Nietzsche, Friedrich, Daybreak: thoughts on the prejudices of morality, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982, section 103.

Nietzsche, Daybreak, section 35.

Nietzsche, Friedrich, Twilight of the Idols, in The Portable Nietzsche, ed. & trans. Walter Kaufmann, New York: Viking Press, 1954, part VII, section 1.

Nietzsche, Friedrich, The Will to Power, trans. R. J. Hollingdale and Walter Kaufmann, ed. Walter Kaufmann, New York: Random House, 1967, section 258.

Ibid., sections 299 and 298.

Nietzsche, The Will to Power, section 1067; The Antichrist, in The Portable Nietzsche, section 2.

Nietzsche, Friedrich, On the Genealogy of Morals, in The Basic Writings of Nietzsche, ed. & trans. Walter Kaufmann, New York: Random House, 1966, preface, section 3.

Nietzsche, Ecce Homo, in The Basic Writings of Nietzsche, part IV, section 8.

Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, in The Basic Writings of Nietzsche, section 21.

Ibid., section 22.

MacIntyre, pp. 18.

I am indebted to James Wallace for this suggestion.

Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, in The Basic Writings of Nietzsche, section 260.

Ibid., section 200.

Ibid., section 262.