

Correspondence

Relativism and Virtue

To the Editors:

One of the more gratifying responses a review can receive is to be taken seriously by the author of the book reviewed, especially when it is a critical review of a thoughtful book. A critical review is always likely to appear to be an affront, moving the author to be either aloofly silent or pugnaciously defensive. Hence, I was indeed pleased to discover that a second edition of MacIntyre's *After Virtue*¹ has recently appeared in which various critical points that I made in my review of the first edition² are generously acknowledged and corrected or discussed. I would like to respond to some of that discussion.

The discussion I have in mind occurs in the new chapter for this edition,³ where MacIntyre tries to reply to my argument that his position entails a moral relativism. In order to assess the adequacy of his reply, I should first make clear why MacIntyre should want to avoid this consequence. After all, not only is moral relativism not obviously false, it has also recently acquired some able defenders, as I pointed out in my review.⁴

MacIntyre devotes the opening part of his book to attacking what he calls "emotivism," one of whose essential features is that moral disagreements between individuals cannot be rationally resolved. The widespread acceptance of emotivism that he claims to discern in our culture constitutes a crisis, threatening the coherence of the language of morality and moral criticism. MacIntyre's project is to sketch a way out of the disorder which emotivism generates. He claims that although emotivism reflects a conception of ethics that has dominated philosophical discussions in the past few centuries, there is an alternative conception of ethics which offers a way out of this situation. This involves an account of morality in terms of the virtues, whose content is given, in part, by a tradition. However, if this alternative entails relativism, then MacIntyre has not succeeded in what he sets himself out to do. This is because, as I tried to show in my review,⁵ emotivism and relativism are on a par, as far as the rational irresolvability of

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1. A. MACINTYRE, *AFTER VIRTUE: A STUDY IN MORAL THEORY* (2d ed. 1984).
 2. Wachbroit, *A Genealogy of Virtues* (Book Review), 92 *YALE L.J.* 564 (1983).
 3. A. MACINTYRE, *supra* note 1, at 272-78.
 4. Wachbroit, *supra* note 2, at 575.
 5. *Id.* at 575-76.

disagreement goes. Consequently, the force of my objection—that MacIntyre's position entails moral relativism—does not rest entirely on alleged difficulties with moral relativism itself. It also derives some force from MacIntyre's attack on emotivism, because that, if successful, constitutes an attack on its near cousin, relativism. My objection is, in part, a piece of internal criticism.

MacIntyre does not appear to acknowledge this connection between relativism and emotivism, at least explicitly, for he focuses only on the apparent rational irresolvability of moral disagreements that relativism allows. The problem he discerns in my objection is that if his view entails relativism, then "we can have no good reason for giving our allegiance to any one particular tradition rather than to any other."⁶

MacIntyre's reply is not to deny the charge of relativism, but rather to argue that the relativism he is committed to is not much of a problem. This is because different moral traditions will not be so different as to preclude the rational resolution of differences, for

[i]f two moral traditions are able to recognize each other as advancing rival contentions on issues of importance, then necessarily they must share some common features. . . . It will thus sometimes at least be possible for adherents of each tradition to understand and evaluate—by their own standards—the characterizations of their positions advanced by their rivals.⁷

Since nothing precludes the possibility of a tradition's evaluating itself, we have the *possibility* of one moral tradition coming to agree with the criticism offered up to it by a rival tradition.

Let us put aside the obvious problem with this reply—i.e., that it is beside the point since these "rival traditions" are not the sort that worry people who are worried about relativism. If MacIntyre's reply is adequate, then, given the similarity between relativism and emotivism, it can be used against his attack on emotivism. The emotivist might thus reply: When two individuals recognize themselves to have a moral disagreement, then they must nevertheless share some common features. And on the basis of a shared understanding, they, like rival moral traditions, may come rationally to resolve their disagreement. If MacIntyre is right in claiming that many modern moral disagreements appear to have no rational terminus, the fault lies not with morality but with the many sources of human irrationality. The language of morality itself is not in disorder.

I am not claiming that a defense of relativism must be a defense of emotivism, for there are important differences between the two. Modern emotivism regards a particular conception of choice as central to moral agency, whereas the relativism that MacIntyre's view presents regards the fact of belonging to a particular tradition as central to moral agency. These differences lead to differences in what constitutes a mistake in a moral judgment, what constitutes responsibility, etc. But these differences do not matter here since my point is not to offer a defense of

6. A. MACINTYRE, *supra* note 1, at 276.

7. *Id.*

emotivism. Far from it. My point is only that if MacIntyre takes his first reply to me seriously, then he must show how these differences can allow him to maintain a relativism without thereby undermining much of his original attack on emotivism or his claim that what he is offering is an *alternative* to emotivism.⁸

In fact, MacIntyre does not appear to take his first reply to me seriously, for he immediately concedes that it does not answer my objection.⁹ It would do so only if supplemented with an argument showing that there could not be a moral tradition whose disagreement with ours is more radical than the kind envisioned by the first reply. But the possibility of producing such an argument, he notes, would contradict his general position with its rejection of *a priori* arguments associated with the Kantian transcendental project. He thus turns to a different reply, which is to plump down for the Aristotelian part of our moral tradition: “[T]he Aristotelian moral tradition is the best example we possess of a tradition whose adherents are rationally entitled to a high measure of confidence in its epistemological and moral resources.”¹⁰ A good deal hangs on whom this “we” in the quote refers to. If the “we” refers only to people who belong to our moral tradition, then the problem of relativism remains: Why should our best example cut any ice with those of another moral tradition? If the “we” refers to everyone, regardless of what moral tradition they find themselves in, then relativism has given way to imperialism. Although there are no moral principles which are independent of the social content of any moral tradition, *everyone* should nevertheless align themselves with the Aristotelian moral tradition.

MacIntyre’s position is far too interesting for me to wish to leave the matter at this point. Instead, I want to look at a different—arguably better—reply for MacIntyre, one more in keeping with the details of his project. It proceeds by questioning the terms in which the objection to relativism is raised. In order to see this, I should say more about what is alleged to be wrong with moral relativism.

Let me proceed at first quite generally. Relativism about a certain class of judgments is the claim that, as they stand, these judgments are incomplete: Their truth or falsity depends upon a factor that is not explicitly mentioned in these judgments. For example, the truth of “Chestnut Street is left of Market Street” depends clearly upon which direction one is facing. If there is a disagreement over this judgment, there is no rational way of settling it without appealing to this implicit factor. Similarly, the truth of judgments about what it is to be well-dressed depends upon the culture. Indeed, without appeal to this factor we cannot tell whether there is even a disagreement, for once this factor is made explicit, the apparent disagreement may disappear altogether. There is no disagreement between saying that wearing a particular costume is being well-dressed in four-

8. That there is a similarity between relativism and emotivism has been noted by others. See, e.g., Foot, *Moral Relativism*, in *RELATIVISM, COGNITIVE AND MORAL* 152 (M. Krausz & J. Meiland eds. 1982).

9. A. MACINTYRE, *supra* note 1, at 277.

10. *Id.*

teenth-century Florence and saying that wearing that same costume is not being well-dressed in seventeenth-century Amsterdam.

Relativism about a class of judgments should not be confused with the claim that there is no truth to these judgments or that there is no way of determining their truth (skepticism). That these other two claims are not entailed by relativism can be seen by noting that the implicit factor on which the truth of these judgments are alleged to depend can, in general, be made explicit. When this is done, the truth or falsity of the resulting judgment is then no longer relative to that respect.¹¹ Thus, while the truth or falsity of "Chestnut Street is left of Market Street" is relative to the direction one is facing, the truth or falsity of "When facing City Hall, Chestnut Street is left of Market Street" is absolute, not relative.¹² Thus, moral relativism does not entail moral skepticism or the conclusion that there are no moral truths. Though perhaps compatible with moral relativism, they are nonetheless separate, additional claims. Objections to them do not constitute objections to moral relativism.

In general, when relativism about a given class of judgments is objected to, it is because those judgments are held to depend upon what seems to be an inappropriate or irrelevant factor. An exception to this is the standard objection to the thesis that truth itself must be relativized. Since there is no difference between asserting that sentence and asserting that a sentence is true (e.g., no difference between asserting "Snow is white" and asserting "It is true that snow is white"), this relativism entails that *every* sentence must be relativized, *every* sentence is incomplete. Hence the correctness of the thesis of relativism about truth itself depends upon some factor which can never be made explicit without contradiction. Thus, relativism about truth becomes ineffable or contradictory. Objections to other forms of relativism proceed differently, focusing on the appropriateness of the factor to which these judgments are held to depend. Because it is appropriate for judgments about sinistrality to depend upon spatial orientation or for judgments about fashion to depend upon cultural norms, relativism about these judgments is hardly a surprise or a source of concern. Similarly, the claim that the truth of moral judgments—such as "you ought not to kill"—must be relativized to the circumstances (Is it a case of self-defense? A case of war?) would strike most philosophers as not deserving the name "moral relativism" since it is reasonable to expect moral judgments of that sort to depend on that factor. However, the claim that the truth of such judgments depends upon culture or tradition is paradigmatically a claim of moral relativism, because morality is thought to tran-

11. I am naturally assuming that making this factor explicit does not result in a different judgment.

12. This last point should make it clear that the relativism I am discussing is one about the *truth or falsity* of a class of judgments, not one about their *meaning*. That is to say, I am assuming that even though the truth of a judgment might depend upon cultural factors, what it means does not. Someone who denies this is either confusing concepts with their syntactic representation (of course, what the word "bad" means in English is different from what it means in German) or claiming that the concepts in question are untranslatable (i.e., not understandable). But then how could one coherently claim that these untranslatable concepts are, e.g., (recognizably) moral concepts?

scend, and so to be independent of, facts about culture or tradition. Murder is wrong, here or there.

This last remark points to a restriction on the language of moral criticism entailed by moral relativism. Our judgment that Hitler was evil is not fully intelligible as it stands. It must mean either that Hitler was evil-according-to-our-culture, or that Hitler was evil-according-to-his-culture. What we might want or feel able to say, but cannot according to the relativist, is that Hitler was evil (flat out, full stop, no qualifications).¹³

This limitation on moral criticism reflects how some cross-cultural disagreements disappear into mere differences. Once the limitation of our condemnation of the practice of slavery in another culture is made explicit, their defense of their practice may not engage with our condemnation. There is no conflict between judging that slavery is good-relative-to-culture-A and judging that slavery is not good-relative-to-culture-B. They are different but compatible judgments.

Up to now we have noted that a relativism about some judgments may be uncontroversial (e.g., judgments of sinistrality), whereas a relativism about *all* judgments (i.e., a relativism about truth) results in a contradiction. In discussing MacIntyre's view, we have been concerned with the more controversial claim regarding relativism about moral judgments. Rather than proceeding further in that direction, let us look instead at a different class of judgments and ask whether relativism is true about them. The judgments I have in mind are those that ascribe specific character traits to individuals. Are attributions of character incomplete unless the culture is taken into account?

It is *initially* quite plausible to claim that judgments about character are incomplete, their truth or falsity depending upon cultural factors. For example, someone might be judged to have a generous character if judged in the context of twentieth-century America. But that person, or rather that same set of dispositions, might not be judged to constitute a generous character; they might even be judged to constitute an ungenerous one, if judged in the context of nineteenth-century Melanesia.¹⁴ Fears, expectations, and what is considered to be normal are, to a large extent, culturally dependent, and they inform judgments about character. This is not terribly surprising. Character has a social content, and so judgments about specific character traits should depend upon culture.

I don't wish to argue for a relativism about character. I only wish to point out its *prima facie* plausibility. My reason for mentioning it is that it suggests a reply for MacIntyre to the worry about relativism. MacIntyre's picture of morality is not centered around moral principles but rather around the virtues. And the virtues are character traits of a certain sort. The relativism that MacIntyre's picture

13. This is a further respect in which moral relativism and emotivism are alike. According to the emotivist, a moral disagreement cannot be rationally resolved because the disagreement reflects different fundamental choices which are themselves prior to any rational assessment. Hence, a moral criticism becomes little more than a complaint that one's choices are not shared. What more can our condemnation of Hitler come to, according to the emotivist, but that his will was at odds with ours? The sense of the criticism depends upon the choices of the critic.

14. The inhabitants of the Andaman Islands present perhaps an even more striking example. See M. MAUSS, *THE GIFT* (1967).

entails is a relativism about the virtues. Any alleged problems with moral relativism as usually understood—a relativism about moral principles—is beside the point because moral principles are not part of this picture of morality. Thus, the suggested reply for MacIntyre would fall into two parts. The first part is an argument from a relativism about character traits to a relativism about moral character traits (i.e., the virtues).¹⁵ The second part is an argument from a relativism about the virtues to a relativism about morality. The conclusion would then be that, because of their social content, whether or not a particular character trait constituted some moral virtue would depend upon the culture. For example, whether someone engaging in passive resistance was exhibiting courage or cowardice would depend upon the culture. Any disagreement over its being an act of courage which did not take this social factor into account could not be rationally resolved for the simple reason that it would not be clear whether the disagreement was real or not.

The reason I think this line of reply is worth considering is not because I think that it is an easy line to defend. Its attraction rather lies in that it does not appear to raise any *new* problems for MacIntyre. In order to see this, let me point out some of the problems this line raises.

Consider the first part. It might be thought that were a relativism about a character trait made out, a relativism about virtue would be straightforward. After all, the example I gave to illustrate relativism about character was one about generosity, and isn't generosity a virtue? Upon reflection, it is not at all clear that the frantic and often competitive giving of gifts among the Melanesians is an expression of a moral character trait. It is of little importance whether this doubt leads us to doubt that they are manifesting generosity or leads us to consider contrasting generosity as a moral trait (virtue) from generosity as a non-moral trait. In either case, the example does not clearly illustrate a relativism about the virtue of generosity.

How to move from talk of character to talk of moral character or virtue does not appear to be a new problem for MacIntyre. His project is to argue that character traits (dispositions) are virtues when they sustain a practice, help achieve the goods internal to that practice, and appropriately relate to the narrative unity of a life and to the tradition in which that life is lived. In my review, I pointed out that this amounts to arguing for relativism. What I am suggesting here is that *if* he can make this out—show that these character traits are moral character traits—then it would seem that he is in a stronger position to defend relativism. Arguably, many of the worries that attend a relativism about moral principles do not arise with a relativism about virtues.

For example, have we no reason for making the attributions of character that we do, given that a different culture or tradition might make different attributions? There is something mad in thinking that the reasons for believing that someone's friend is generous are undermined because he or she would not be considered generous in nineteenth-century Melanesia. This would be like think-

15. The importance of arguing for this step was impressed upon me by my colleague, Professor A. Eshete, in conversation.

ing that a judgment of sinistrality is undermined because someone else could be facing in a different direction. Presumably, an argument to the effect that the self has a social content should provide some justification for not regarding as arbitrary the relativization of the attribution to that self's culture.

The same point can be made by asking: Does this relativism about virtues pose a threat to the scope of moral criticism in the same way that moral relativism, traditionally understood, is alleged to do? Apparently not, at least for some of the virtues—e.g., courage, generosity, and temperance. This is because such criticism seems to have little if any cross-cultural pretensions. That an ancient Greek or a medieval Mogul might not judge that Gandhi had courage does not conflict with our assessment of that man, for it is not clear whether his activities would have taken courage if he had been a member of those other cultures instead. But then he would not have been Gandhi. By appealing to the social content of the self, relativism about the virtues can be distinguished from relativism about moral principles and from emotivism.

I don't wish to suggest that arguing this first part is easy. Indeed, in advance of seeing the details, I am not sure that it will not in the end come down to arguing for something like a relativism about moral principles. Nevertheless, if MacIntyre succeeds in accounting for the virtues in the way he wants to, then he will have given in effect an argument for this first part.

Someone might object by saying that even supposing that a relativism about the virtues could be made out, the problem of moral relativism still remains. Nothing has so far been said to undermine the intelligibility of asking whether having a particular character trait, even though it is a virtue in some culture, is a good thing in that culture. This is answered by arguing for the second part of the reply, showing that all of morality can be accounted for by giving an account of the virtues. Arguing for this is not a new problem, since this is precisely the significance MacIntyre claims for his project. If he can argue successfully for this as well as for the first part, then the objector's problem is settled: What he or she wants to ask is unintelligible. Thus it would seem that arguing for a relativism about the virtues and about character traits in general is a better response for MacIntyre to the objection of moral relativism, for it is more in keeping with his enterprise. Whether it can be made out remains to be seen.

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