

## Prometheus and the Owl of Minerva

This essay is an investigation into the moral and political theories of Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor, often grouped together under the “communitarian” label in the liberal-communitarian debate. My definition of a communitarian is one who believes that humans are fundamentally social and political animals, and sees human life as embodied in context, in the community and in human interaction. Examining the dynamics between MacIntyre and Taylor, two of the debate’s most prominent thinkers, is crucial to our understanding of this tradition, along with its *grandeur* and *misère*. The first section of this paper describes MacIntyre and Taylor's criticism of modernity. The second aims at capturing both MacIntyre and Taylor's method of forging a renewed human agency. The final section reveals my critique of Taylor and MacIntyre, with the conclusion that the communitarian project remains unfinished.

### I. Beyond Manichaeism

One of the facets of the status quo and modern liberal society which both MacIntyre and Taylor reject is the stark distinction we make between objective and subjective. This is the distinction between reason and passion, empirical and ideal, 'is' and 'ought'. Both communitarians critique the way in which this distinction trivializes moral theories by relegating them to the realm of the subjective.

In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre encapsulates liberalism's entrenchment of the distinction between objective and subjective in the ideology of emotivism, which he defines as “the doctrine that ... all moral judgments are *nothing but* expressions of preference ... or feeling” (MacIntyre, 2007, pp. 11-12). My convictions are expressions of mere preferences and a partial understanding of a morally neutral world. Under emotivism, there is a divide between what we are evaluating (the 'is') and our subjective evaluations of it (the many 'oughts'). An argument on matters of conviction can only end in stalemate. Emotivism is the self-image of the age, the

progeny of David Hume and his assertion that reason is the slave of non-rational passions (p.14).

Since I *adopt* my position, it is implicitly divorced from my essential being. The ghostly 'I' is devoid of convictions, constitutive attachments and normative goals. The self loses its social character and its substantive content (p.32). What lies beneath the emotivist self is nothing. It is a simulacra of a self, easily transposed from one theoretical position to another, whether it be manifested in the Nietzschean *Übermensch* or the “Sartrian Existentialist-cum-Marxist”(p.22). The hidden power of emotivism lies in its adaptability. Emotivism is the universal solvent, dissolving the content of any modern grand narrative, emptying its content and retaining its style, leaving it like the skin of a dead snake.

MacIntyre accuses most people of thinking, speaking and acting “as if emotivism were true, no matter what their avowed theoretical standpoint may be. Emotivism has become embodied in our culture” (p.22). He condemns the culture of modernity for the emotivist amorality that pervades across modern ideologies. The universally accepted distinction between facts and values is obfuscated by the diversity of personal preferences available to the ghostly 'I'. The “irreducible plurality” of values, of personal preferences, is consistent with a Weberian vision of the world, one of atomized individuals in a bureaucratic superstructure of hierarchy and efficiency, where ends are unquestioned and means run wild (p. 108).

MacIntyre's claims that the Enlightenment project, which has become eroded by emotivism, systematically rejected Aristotle (p.117). Emotivism is true *only* if one ignores the historical deviation from Aristotelian virtue ethics. MacIntyre describes the failure of Enlightenment thinkers to come up with a consistent, convincing and cogent moral theory as an “historical sequel” to their rejection of Aristotle (p.118). We see, then, that the distinction between fact and value is contingent upon historical circumstances. Emotivism is not universal,

ahistorical or natural. To MacIntyre, its nihilistic conclusions can be avoided if one reverses the historical turn away from Aristotle. This is how MacIntyre's theory opens up the possibility of a renewed moral theory impervious to the corrosive effects of emotivism.

The culture that MacIntyre challenges is the same one that Charles Taylor critiques, albeit in a different way. How Taylor reacts to modernity is, broadly speaking, similar to MacIntyre, yet there are subtle differences in the way in which they frame their ideas regarding the nature of our condition under modernity. Taylor perceives the culture of modern moral squabbling to be less sinister than in MacIntyre's view. Taylor refers to this culture in *Sources of the Self*, when he speaks of the "ethics of inarticulacy," where we are unable to express or articulate our vision of the good life (Taylor, 1989, p.91). This culture has – once again – been historically derived from the Humean distinction between 'ought' and 'is' (p.53). Taylor critiques our shift from thinking about and evaluating the *outcomes* of moral reasoning, to the *way* in which we arrive at our conclusions (p.85). We therefore lose focus upon outcomes and our intersubjective goals within the life of the community.

Moral reasoning is reduced to liberal procedural ethics, which examine the process of *how* we think and *how* we come to our conclusions (p.86). Taylor writes that the

rationality of an agent or his thought is judged by how he thinks, not in the first instance by whether the outcome is substantively correct. Good thinking is defined procedurally ... We end up with the assurance that this will give us substantive truth (p.86).

Rationality becomes relegated to the domain of the procedural, and what is right is only right insofar as it is arrived at along the road of reason. Taylor attacks the Rawlsian procedural ethic, writing that "in a sense, the good is always primary to the right ... in that the good is what, in its articulation, gives the point of the rules which define the right" (p.89). To Taylor, the rules of justice are useless without a predetermined good, as right procedure is useless if not directed

towards a sound goal.

The ghost of Hegel weighs upon Taylor. In his introduction to Hegelian thought, *Hegel and Modern Society*, Taylor reminds us of the concept of *Sittlichkeit*, roughly translated as the “ethical life,” which lives in and is sustained by a community (Taylor, 1979, p.83). This concept is very similar to the good life that Taylor claims we need to envision in order to have a point to the right. Taylor writes that

Hegel's notion of *Sittlichkeit* is in part a rendering of that expressive unity which his whole generation saw in the Greek polis, where – it was believed – men had seen the collective life of their city as the essence and meaning of their own lives (p.84)

Taylor says that “*Sittlichkeit* ... enjoins us to bring about what already is” (p.83). It collapses the distinction between what 'ought' and what 'is' (p.83). *Sittlichkeit* is simultaneously what 'is' and what 'ought'; we ought to live in concert with the community that already is, as community itself is virtuous. The entrenchment of the distinction between 'ought' and 'is' under Manichaeism is agonistic towards a thriving *Sittlichkeit*. And so a resurrected conception of *Sittlichkeit*, risen like Lazarus on the fourth day, can defy the Humean distinction embedded in modernity.

Taylor continues his attack upon the procedural ethic in the *Malaise of Modernity*, where he suggests the risk of cultural narcissism (Taylor, 1991, p.55). An important cleavage between Taylor and MacIntyre is embodied in this suggestion: to Taylor, modernity *risks* narcissism; to MacIntyre, this narcissism is already entrenched. Taylor shares MacIntyre's sentiment towards the Manichaeism divide; however, they disagree on the scope of hegemony that this divide holds over modern culture. In an essay on *After Virtue* entitled “Justice After Virtue,” Taylor points out that MacIntyre's understanding of liberal society is based upon the self-image of the age, almost taking modern society at the “face value of its own dominant theories” (Taylor, 1994, p.22).

Taylor suggests that MacIntyre permits the possibility of society devoid of an Aristotelian meta-ethic because of his acceptance of modern society's self-image (p.22). MacIntyre assumes the image of society provided by liberals: individualism, atomism and alienation *truly are* our way of living. This shortsightedness leads MacIntyre to reject modernity in a much more absolute way than Taylor. Taylor rejects the possibility of living and being in a way which truly shrugs off Aristotelian values of virtue, community and the good life. He seems to be attempting to one-up MacIntyre by rejecting even the image of society which dominant theories presuppose.

Taylor also suggests that modernity's "substantive ethical vision" – towards greater equality and more individual freedom – may actually be rescuable (p.23). In this way, Taylor rejects the superficial level of proceduralist liberalism in a much more absolute way than MacIntyre, even if his critique of modernity as a whole is much less radical. And indeed, it is less radical, as it claims a balanced view of modernity, suggesting it is "characterized by *grandeur* as well as by *misère*" (Taylor, 1991, p.121). Taylor goes on to say that "only a view that embraces both can give us the undistorted insight into our era that we need to rise to its greatest challenge" (p.121).

## II. What is to be done?

In the following section I will describe MacIntyre and Taylor's attempts to spur moral progress and restore human agency in the face of modern *praxisentzug*, the bog of doubt and partiality that characterizes our present situation. This discussion will ground the final section of my paper, where I present my own suggestions for restoring human agency, speaking from broadly the same tradition as both MacIntyre and Taylor.

MacIntyre's history as a Marxist in his earlier years helps contextualize and illuminate his lifelong struggle to regain human agency. While MacIntyre admits that he "was and [remains]

deeply indebted to Marx's critique of the economic, social, and cultural order of capitalism” he says that *After Virtue* is a “recognition of [the] moral inadequacies of Marxism” (MacIntyre, 2007, p. Xvi). This indicates an affinity with, even affirmation of, the sociological level of Marxian analysis: that capitalism alienates individuals and crushes the human spirit, historical progress through material struggle, etc. However, to MacIntyre, Marxism fails to provide its sociological analysis with the moral weapons necessary to conquer emotivism, the ideology of the non-committal bourgeois. MacIntyre's rejection of Marxism is due to its disregard for philosophy and moral theory, which can be summed up in Marx's “11<sup>th</sup> Thesis on Feuerbach” that “philosophers have only interpreted the world. The point, however, is to change it” (Marx, 1994, p.101). MacIntyre feels that Marxists must fill this void with another moral theory to give them the conviction necessary to reconstruct society.

MacIntyre's rejection of modernity necessitates a rejection of orthodox Marxism as a modern ideology. The entrenched culture of interminable squabbling, which prevents genuine moral progress and reduces moral theories to pure personal preference, stops socialism from mounting serious challenges to the status quo, as it is easily castigated as the personal preference of a few left-wing nutbars. Marxists are left feebly brandishing their rusty swords, a non-threat. Marxism and socialism become lost in a culture of ostensible diversity of opinion that disguises a more hideous uniformity of alienation and dehumanization. And so MacIntyre's rejection of Marxism is not so much a rejection of the spirit of Marxism, but rather of the limits imposed upon it as an ideology vulnerable to emotivism.

To MacIntyre, *contra* Marx, if we are to change the world we must first properly interpret it, based on an acute understanding of philosophical and moral issues. This is what I believe he means when he writes that “if moral considerations are important, if socialism is to have a

human face, then we shall have to understand what part reasoning and deliberation play in bringing about one sort of action rather than another” (MacIntyre, 1971, “Philosophy,” p.94). A new socialism must be perpetually critical of the self-image of the age, and willing to reason on moral issues. If we are to reclaim human agency and establish a new order under which we are no longer alienated, then we must construct a new moral theory with which to combat emotivism. MacIntyre couples a quasi-Marxian sociological analysis with a moral theory equally potent.

In one of his earlier essays, “Marxism of the will,” MacIntyre writes that Che Guevara's Kantian moralism – his “attempt to transcend the material environment” – tried to fill in orthodox, amoral, scientific Marxism (MacIntyre, 1971, “Marxism,” p.75). It was his tragic flaw, the ladder that he climbed up and the ladder from which he fell. MacIntyre writes:

What [admirer's of Che] admire is just that abstract moralism which Marx himself ought to have taught us to suspect. Che's last letter to his parents begins with an allusion to Cervantes: “Once more I feel Rocinante's ribs under my heels; I'm taking to the road again with my shield on my arm.” Perhaps as he wrote this he should have remembered that other reminiscence of Cervantes in a footnote in *Capital* that ends by Marx remarking that “Don Quixote long ago paid the penalty for wrongly imagining that knight errantry was compatible with all economic forms of society. (p. 75).

On the one hand, if socialists are to overturn capitalism and its cultural order, they must have the acuteness of material vision, unclouded by lofty moral ideals, necessary to accurately examine the operations of capital and find its Achilles' heel. This is Marx's overturning of Hegel, his application of dialectics to material, economic and historical relations rather than to vague philosophical ideals. On the other hand, if socialists are to replace the current liberal order with something more human, then they cannot live in the world as cold engineers, orthodox scientific



Marxists, moral idiots removed from the human condition. They would then not only leave themselves vulnerable to the critique that they are stepping on the slippery slope towards Stalinist tyranny, but more importantly, fail to equip themselves with the moral resources to actually overturn emotivism.

And so MacIntyre's attempts to construct a new ideology. By fusing together the moral theory of a neo-Aristotelian tradition – with emphases upon virtues, community, narrative, historicism and culture – with the sociological analysis of Marxism, MacIntyre seems to be aiming to equip the socialist-humanist with the moral weapons necessary to conquer emotivism and capitalism. He is not really so far away from Marxism as he would have us think.

Taylor, however, speaks as if modernity needs only revitalization and improvement, rather than defeat. Taylor does not stand in defiance of modernity but, rather calls for our understanding of its historical development so that we may see ourselves more clearly and realize a fuller moral self-consciousness. Through his articulation of the “history of the modern identity,” Taylor attempts to clarify how he perceives we have come to our present self-understanding (Taylor, 1989, p. ix). He states that the “intention of [*Sources of the Self*] was one of retrieval, an attempt to uncover buried goods through rearticulation – and thereby to make these sources again empower, to bring the air back again into the half-collapsed lungs of the spirit” (p.520). Taylor is encouraging modern *Anthropos* to move towards what he perceives to be a higher self-consciousness, in the hopes that this will uncover human agency, buried under confusion and inarticulacy.

One could not possibly do any sort of justice to Taylor without recognizing the influence of Hegel upon his thought. The Manichaeic world in which we find ourselves, through the eyes of Taylor, is reminiscent of the world confronting the Romantic thinkers of the *Sturm und Drang*

generation (Taylor, 1979, p.10). Taylor, when describing their world, wrote that it was characterized by the

division between the two ideals of radical freedom and integral expression ... the opposition between the fullest self-conscious freedom on one side, and life in the community on the other; the opposition between self-consciousness and communion with nature; and beyond this the separation of finite subjectivity from the infinite life that flowed through nature (p.8).

Taylor's attempt to rearticulate the sources of the modern self is also reminiscent of the Hegelian model of history, where *Anthropos* begins in unreflective, contained life within nature and with the onset of reason moves to a life where reason and passion are divided, and then finally progresses to a “higher synthesis,” with full reflective consciousness (p.8). Taylor calls for us to move towards this higher synthesis, by examining the historical narrative through which the present understanding of the self came about. And so Taylor's claim that we need to engage in a “many-faceted debate,” weighing both the *grandeur* and *misère* of modernity, makes some sense: in order to come up with this accurate collective self-image, we must engage in public debate informed by historical and philosophical inquiry (Taylor, 1991, p.120). Human agency presupposes self-consciousness, and Taylor aims to contribute to our self-consciousness through his history of the modern self.

MacIntyre attempts to find the bouillon for a new, empowering communitarian ideology – with a sociological analysis echoing Marx – in the moral tradition of Aristotle, by rejecting the Enlightenment project and its emotivist consequences. Taylor, on the other hand, seeks to restore human agency by sharpening our self-understanding and tracing the historical development of the self. To MacIntyre, the modern self is a wrong turn away from Aristotle and towards emotivism; to Taylor, the modern self is an unfinished stage in an ongoing process of development towards a higher synthesis. In the next section, I will attempt to state what I believe

to be the problematic aspects of their theories, stemming, ultimately, from their assumption of Hegel's famous metaphor that the owl of Minerva only flies at the coming of dusk. (Taylor, 1979, p.122).

### III. Shaking the Nest of the Owl of Minerva

MacIntyre writes that Hegel's view is that:

Human action is characteristically neither blind and goalless nor the mere implementation of means to an already decided end. Acting that is the bringing about of such an end by a calculated means certainly has a place, but a subordinate place, in human activity ... we can understand human affairs only after the event. The owl of Minerva, as Hegel ... put it, flies only at dusk. (MacIntyre, 1972, p.234)

It is Hegel's metaphor of the owl of Minerva that I would like to frame my discussion in this section of the essay. Under modernity, a world divided, MacIntyre and Taylor lie waiting for dusk. They accept Hegel's metaphor of the owl of Minerva. This is the very point at which I find their perspectives problematic. The problem of the metaphor of the owl of Minerva is that if we are left waiting for dusk, our consciousness is always one step behind our activity, and we cannot truly be rational agents with the capacity to act and to guide our future. This is a problem that I do not believe MacIntyre and Taylor adequately tackle, although they both provide valiant efforts to restore human agency in the face of corrosive emotivism and a neutralizing liberalism.

There must be, if we are to reject a crushing determinism, a way for us to act with a goal in mind and see it come about. Owls are known to fly after dusk and before dawn on occasion, and human societies are similarly known to occasionally have the self-understanding required to collectively act and construct new modes of operation. Otherwise we would live in a state of nature, and we simply do not. Although I do not claim to have identified how we can instigate a fleeting moment of human agency in the name of a society less fragmented, I draw the deceptively simple conclusion that we can.

MacIntyre writes that

liberalism by itself is essentially negative and incomplete ... The precepts of liberalism enjoin upon us certain constraints on our political activities; but they set before us no ends to pursue, no ideal or vision to confer significance upon our political action. They never tell us what to do (MacIntyre, 1971, "Political," pp.282-3).

If liberalism tells us what not to do, then we must find a way to figure out what we ought to do. And this is what the communitarian project, manifested in both MacIntyre and Taylor, aims to achieve. MacIntyre writes that "the good life for man is the life spent in seeking for the good life for man" (MacIntyre, 2007, p.219). Virtues sustain our relationships to other characters in our life-narratives, and these relationships help construct our social identity (p.220). Living up to the moral obligations of our social roles and relationships allows us to live fuller, unified, good lives within the boundaries of our communities.

And so we are told what to do, at least as individuals. But how do we establish and entrench a culture of the virtues? This is a question that MacIntyre answers by suggesting that we ought to "[construct] local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us" (p.263). But this rests upon our choice, as individuals, to hold onto the tradition of the virtues that MacIntyre aims to resurrect. We are left waiting for the owl of Minerva to fly, for others to recognize the intrinsic value in living the good life, hermetically, away from the world that we aim to change. This is not an Aristotelian solution; this is a stoic solution. MacIntyre invites us, like the stoics, "to stand against the world of physical and political circumstance ... [and] do whatever is right for its own sake" (p.169).

The virtues lose their telos in this analysis. We are no longer called to live the moral life with a goal in mind, but rather for the purpose of living the moral life. I find this problematic

because it negates the possibility of us having the capacity to determine the good way of organizing society. I am not an agent if I am forced to live it in isolation. The good society of the virtues and of civic democracy – the telos of the communitarian project – becomes an abstract ideal, disconnected from present circumstance. We have no praxis to help us actualize our theory. MacIntyre's writings demonstrate a disabling pessimism with regard to our capacity to realize a virtuous society. If this is the case, MacIntyre's theory is unable to conquer the emotivism it seeks to overturn. We have no choice but to wait in another Qumran, alienated from contemporary society, unable to challenge the status quo.

In Taylor's writings on Hegel, he describes what he calls 'expressivism' as the philosophical tradition that sees human life as a work of art, in expressive unity, and sees the human's highest fulfilment in expressive activity (Taylor, 1979, p.2). This he establishes as having two sub-traditions, which revolve around two concomitant aspirations: the Dionysiac and the Promethean (p.140). The Dionysiac sees expressive unity as embracing our nature in the form of culture, land, heritage; the ontological focus is thus on nature, not on *Anthropos*. (p.140). The Promethean, on the other hand, sees expressive unity with nature through self-creation and mastery over nature (pp.144-5).

If the communitarian project is to forge a new ideology that is capable of stepping out of the sticky muck of emotivist partiality and moving beyond the Manichaeian world of present liberalism to restore human agency, it must be willing to shift its ontological lens onto the human. It must accept aspects of the Promethean aspiration to self-creation, albeit with a recognition, in light of the current environmental crisis, that we cannot master nature, only ourselves under nature. If the communitarian project does not accept the Promethean aspiration of self-creation, it cannot overcome the partiality assigned to it by pluralism. If the

communitarian cannot say to others, and even to him or herself, that we can create a new society, a better society, the *good* society, then he or she cannot have any hopes of escaping neutralization. Furthermore, without asserting that humans can *create* a new society, the communitarian cannot claim to see humans as having the capacity to *act*, as moral agents, capable of determining their own common future.

Taylor writes that the Promethean tradition

offers no idea at all of what the society of freedom should look like beyond the empty formulae: that it should be endlessly creative; have no divisions ... All that is done in these negative characterizations is to think away the entire human situation. Small wonder then that this freedom has no content. (p. 155).

This is too general a statement regarding too broad a range of perspectives to mean much. It seems more like a reactionary argument against all challenges to the status quo. One might think from Taylor's polemic that he is more of an old-style conservative than a socialist. Indeed, perhaps his consistent attempts to inoculate himself from criticism from mainstream liberalism – his timidity and general avoidance of any strong statements – undercut his ability to find a new source of empowerment and agency in an age of doubt and emotivism.

Taylor's conclusion is inconsistent with the communitarian project, as I have established it. Because this project aims to shrug off the partiality ascribed to moral theories and political ideologies and restore our confidence in collective, democratic decision-making, it cannot tolerate Taylor's unwillingness to make bold normative statements and challenge the self-image of the age. It must be willing to accept the risks of Prometheanism – Prometheus being the first leftist, after all – if it is to offer the moral confidence necessary to overturn the status quo.

Furthermore, the sociological level of Taylor's analysis is somewhat muddled. This seems to be because Taylor wants to have his cake and eat it too: he aims to challenge hegemonic

liberalism, without opening himself up to the criticism normally hurled at communitarians. When we read statements such as the following, which appear self-stultifying after all, we are left wondering what Taylor even means:

Our challenge is actually to combine in some non-self-stultifying fashion a number of ways of operating, which are jointly necessary to a free and prosperous society but which also tend to impede each other: market allocations, state planning, collective provision for need, the defence of individual rights, and effective democratic initiative and control. (Taylor, 1991, p. 110).

This vision of society sounds like the present Western liberal democracy, the very society Taylor aims to challenge. Its embrace of “market allocations” contradicts the earlier sociological telos that Taylor envisioned in his earlier years, when he wrote the following:

The only way that we can really get our priorities right is to do away with the dominating influence of the profit system, and to put in its place a system primarily based on common ownership ... the *only* political question is how we can understand and change them in order to achieve an enlargement of freedom and responsibility, and a greater control by people over the society in which they live. (Taylor, 1960, p.11)

Taylor has tempered his criticism of contemporary society, and in doing so, has lost the Promethean spirit necessary to effectively challenge the towering edifice of modernity.

Throughout much of Taylor's thought, there is an ambiguity which inoculates him from strong criticism, while giving his writing the feeling that he is not even really sure if he believes his proposals himself. He is afflicted with the same malaise that MacIntyre recognizes in the ideology of emotivism. Taylor does not rise to the challenge that he has set before himself: using his eloquent, sophisticated and systematic *interpretation* of the modern world to *change* it. If the 'is' can lead us to the 'ought,' our collective self-understanding can lead us to self-creation and self-mastery. Taylor's project remains unfinished.

*La lotta continua*, and Taylor is, as he is fully aware, not the last word (Taylor, 1989,

p.520). Nor is MacIntyre. Taylor and MacIntyre's projects are not in vain, but are incomplete. They do, indeed, tackle real problems that afflict modern humanity: division, alienation, moral uncertainty, and a range of other plagues upon our agency. But they do not comprehensively overturn them: their positive arguments require augmentation to find the potency necessary to rise to the challenge of reclaiming human agency in the face of corrosive liberalism. But who can, after all, hope to do so in one swing?

If we are to reclaim human agency, if we are to *act*, in a true Promethean spirit, we must use the self-understanding afforded to us by philosophical inquiry to determine our action. We must move history forward with philosophically informed action, and shake the nest of the owl of Minerva in the daytime of the present.

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