

An essay on Alasdair MacIntyre's
"Relativism. Power and Philosophy"

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3 May 2008
Johannesburg

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Introduction

MacIntyre covers pertinent topics such as the limits of language, epistemology and the difficulty of objectivity. He uses an ongoing example of a person who belongs to two different linguistic groups. This example forms the backdrop for his argument of rational relativism, and its strengths and weaknesses, while simultaneously commenting on the nature of philosophy within this topic. He shows how power and force can be rationally justified by one group in the name of ideology, while concurrently condemned by another cohort (MacIntyre, 1987). A summary of the main points follows.

Relativism Argued

MacIntyre opens his essay with an argument regarding the constant negation of relativism by its critics (1987:385). His question is that if relativism had no truth elements then why has it been refuted more than once, starting with Plato's critic of the sophist Protagoras in his dialogue *Thaetetus*. MacIntyre believes that philosophical doctrines that are not genuinely refutable could be placed into one of two categories. Either the doctrine can be explained via rational justification, or alternatively one's thought may need to be taken to another level or dimension, but only after having gained an adequate understanding of the theory in question (1987:386). MacIntyre shows his acknowledgement of there being more than one type of relativism and that it is more than a unitary construct, such as when he says "in favour of at least one version of relativism only after reading some ... root and branch dismissals" (1987: 384). He references the *Theatetus*, which itself still has ongoing debates regarding various issues. For example, Chappell believes that there is still a division of thought regarding whether Plato's work is full of revisions, retractions and direction changes – the Revisionists, while others believe that his work is a unitary display of thought – the Unitarians – such as Aristotle (2005:para.14). MacIntyre feels that the arguments against relativism are largely misdirected, however he does not dismiss the previous refutations as they do offer use in exhibiting how not to frame it, citing Socrates' dialogue regarding Protagoras' works and Hegel's critique of Kant (MacIntyre, 1987:387). MacIntyre gives cognisance to the context to which the arguments against relativism have been constructed. The topic of context runs through his work and can be seen as a major theme in his essay.

MacIntyre proposes that to obtain the truth elements of relativism, any self-refuting theory should be avoided including scheme/content differences that may arise. This is

an understandable position that MacIntyre takes, as Protagoras' famous statement "man [a human being] is the measure of all things..." opens up many doors to refutation (Protagoras, 2008, para.3. My brackets).

MacIntyre introduces the philosophers' often neglected role in terms of this topic. He points out that for certain cultures; relativism is a rational outcome to certain social occurrences and pragmatics of everyday life by use of an example.

An Example of Rational Relativism, Power and Philosophy

MacIntyre sets the scene of a person who inhabits two dissimilar linguistic groups. This person is a *full* member as he puts, which means that he/she understands his/her language and way of being from the perspective of both cohorts (1987). He talks about a boundary situation in which the two groups or cultures have different methods for carrying out their activities, which includes their ethics, laws, rationality, beliefs and values. He stresses how different these two communities are by saying that they have different cosmic orders and thus different truths (MacIntyre, 1987). The two groups or cultures are thus quite different, however he later points out a similarity, which will be covered towards the end of this summary.

MacIntyre touches on an important point regarding language and how it often translates to mean a different lived experience. A person, who say for example is a member of the San Bushmen of the Kalahari and Botswana region would have a different way of expressing their thoughts and communicating when viewed through the eyes of a Westerner. While both may share similar existential values regarding birth, death and illness, the reasoning and conclusions might be different and incommensurable. From a biological perspective, Maturana and Varela explain how our experiences are mapped in our neurology, which in turn relates to how our thoughts come together to produce our epistemology (1987).

MacIntyre explains how the relationship between names and their evoked meaning and use are not common to all types of people. A traveller may use a proper name merely for directional purposes, almost in a way that may seem ignorant to the culture where that name has more substance than merely a label on a map. For example, if a European holiday maker had to ask for directions to an airport, namely O.R Tambo, but is not aware of the name change and reads off his/her outdated map Jan Smuts Airport, it may evoke certain memories in the person who has a lived experience of the memories related to Jan Smuts.

MacIntyre gives an example of land ownership and how the view from one cultural perspective, namely the Spaniards, where individual property rights were status quo, differs from that of the Indian inhabitants who had the belief of a common unownable land.

The natural course of events in one culture may be immoral or unthinkable and absurd to another culture. With such differences in world views, there are often occasions where the common everyday words in one culture has no direct translation into another culture, and thus to portray the words *true* meaning becomes difficult. MacIntyre himself illustrates this by way of his use of the word “*weltanschauung*”. Many a person has commented how there is no adequate word in English that can encompass the totality of the German meaning for worldview. Carl Jung and others have shown time and time again how words lose/change some of their meaning when translated from one language to another, for example words like libido, hysteria, and the Greek word *hamartia* which means to miss the mark but in English means sin.

MacIntyre proposes that certain powers are available to people who have the ability to use their language in a way that references and manipulates the canonical texts of its origin, but this needs to be a shared ability among more than one person (1987:391). The ability to innovate and extrapolate terms originates from the vast works that poets and mythical writers have built up over the years, to a point where it becomes formalised and used as an accepted societal standard for that society or culture (MacIntyre, 1987:392). Thus the canonical texts form a foundation and justification system that seems unarguable or detestable, unless the arguments are made within the same frame of reference or more correctly *weltanschauung*. If two cultures are brought together as MacIntyre proposed in his example of the two different linguistic communities, there would be vast misunderstandings. Not only due to the lack of translatability of the two languages between each other, but also due to the lack of common cultural norms and beliefs. MacIntyre highlights that the person in his example who inhabits and is versed in both these linguistic communities, would be better able to detail the parts of each language that is not readily translatable. This person would find him/herself between two worlds where each has developed a social reality that has become a common truth. However, a dilemma unfolds as this reality/truth is an intra group reality rather than an inter group reality with each having adequate justification for their own beliefs. MacIntyre has successfully set the stage for a person to have a rational relativist response of “seems right to this group

because of such and such” rather than being able to just dismiss the one group in favour of the other. This person does not have access to another neutral reality or some ultimate truth to which he/she can make a judgement, and is thus limited by the language and culture of the two communities (MacIntyre, 1987).

MacIntyre highlights a common historical occurrence of how force and will to power become justified through a lack of understanding between two groups. While the one group may think they are acting with ethic and reason, this may be interpreted as nasty unwarranted behaviour by the other group. The offended group may turn to their choice of canonically based reasonable reaction options, which too often ends in bloodshed in the name of survival of their cultural dignity. MacIntyre states that the above scenario is a common outcome of when relativism is left as the last word and the limits of the linguistic and conceptual abilities of the two groups in question have not been transcended (1987). How then can one transcend these limits?

MacIntyre proposes the generation of a third unbiased language, that can absorb both the two rival justifications of their respective belief systems, and he highlights the characteristics of such a third reference language (1987). He quickly shows how this supposedly neutral language, such as modern English, too becomes prone to the epistemological stances of the people who inhabit this language.

He argues for an understanding and culture that can acknowledge *the best so far* (Baynes, Bohnman, and McCarthy, 1987). The realisation of which can only take place if we ourselves are able to concede defeat to a transcendent rationality (MacIntyre, 1987:409). This would mean that a readiness to accept a previously unintelligible way of being as a possible better future way of living. For example, the advances made by Newton and his followers changed the landscape of science in many fields such as mathematics, mechanical motion, gravitation and optics, which surpassed the works of what had been done up until then. It challenged the status quo of current scientists, filled in the gaps of others’ shortfalls and provided a base for later scientists to improve on. It thus improved on the best up until that point to transcend it to what has been the base for the next group to add/improve on.

Conclusion

MacIntyre successfully illustrates how context should accompany the understanding and justification of another’s social truth. As Gregory Bateson says, it is the context that defines the content, or the map is not the territory [the latter borrowed from Alfred Korzybski] (1972). MacIntyre explains how the meaning of names is not a unitary

concept but rather an assorted array of punctuating the relationship between names and the named. The idea of a true nature is argued against in that if the item had a true nature then it could be named and decrypted out of its context. MacIntyre does not believe that one should view items outside of their historical context and thus maintains that the item in question should be viewed or interpreted together with its historical context (Baynes, et al, 1987:382).

MacIntyre acknowledges the epistemological factors that are present and incorporates the school of philosophy into this point where he says “all philosophy, one way or another, is political philosophy” (MacIntyre, 1987: 398).

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