

# A Critique of MacIntyrean Morality From a Kantian Perspective

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## Abstract

This article is a critical examination of MacIntyre's notion of morality in reference to Kant's deontological moral theory. The examination shows that MacIntyre (a) criticizes Kant's moral theory to defend virtue ethics or neo-Aristotelian ethics with a weak notion of morality; (b) favors the idea of local morality, which does not leave any room for moral assessment and reciprocity in an intercultural domain; and (c) fails to provide good arguments for his moral historicism and against Kant's moral universalism.

## Keywords

moral historicism, deontological, universalizability, cultural, Enlightenment, Virtue

Since the early period of the 20th century, the discussion on morality in the West seems to have taken a *u-turn* to replant teleological ethical theory with a little modification under the name of *traditional* morality that is a form of *moral historicism*, which claims moral values can be inferred from the course of history of one's culture and tradition. Those who were and are still trying to do so are bound to face the stumbling block of the most dominating ethical theory of the 18th century and thereafter: Kantian deontological theory. Their preliminary task was/is to crack the resistance of this theory so that they can reconstruct the notion of something like neo-Aristotelian ethics to which they were and are sympathetic. Alasdair MacIntyre is among those names I can cite in this connection and primarily intend to discuss in this article.

MacIntyre criticizes Kant's deontological moral theory and favors the idea of local morality, which is in one sense a form of moral historicism and in another sense neo-Aristotelian ethics. In this article, I aim to show that MacIntyre's notion of morality and arguments against Kantian morality are too weak to defend his position, and this is what makes MacIntyre's moral theory comparatively less significant in a larger public moral domain. For a better understanding of MacIntyrean ethics and my comments on it, I have divided this *seminal* article into three sections: The first section examines MacIntyre's response to Kant; second examines his response to Hare, who defended Kant's universalizability thesis; and the third section gives a brief overview of MacIntyre's moral historicism. My response to MacIntyre can be seen in the arguments I have given in these sections. The final section is a concluding note.

## MacIntyre on Kant

MacIntyre seems to defend the anti-universalizability thesis (hereafter AUT) in most of his writings on morality in contrast to the universalizability thesis (hereafter UT) of Kant and neo-Kantians, even though it is quite difficult to extract such a thesis from his writings.<sup>1</sup> When he argues that morality is something rooted in one's practice, traditions, and social contexts, he seems to have advanced a strong version of anti-universalist thesis that one's tradition determines one's rationalism and "the good," and "the right" of individuals must be determined by their relations to communities and cultures of their interests. Such a thesis certainly qualifies him to be called an anti-universalist communitarian.

MacIntyre holds a very complex view on "what morality is" as is evident from his definition of "practice" in terms of "socially established cooperative human activity." His thoughts are scattered and disorganized as most of his writings and lectures on morality produce a kind of amalgam of his thoughts on ethics, history, social sciences, philosophy, and other related disciplines of knowledge. Scholars like Solomon observe the same kind of difficulty in MacIntyre's writings (Solomon, 2003, p. 114). So to identify his position on morality as his unified moral theory, one must extract and collate his scattered moral ideas.<sup>2</sup>

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MacIntyre criticizes Kant making *many* serious allegations against him: First, Kant is a representative of the Enlightenment Project (MacIntyre, 1967, p. 190), the attempt of which failed because of its ignorance of human history, tradition, and community (Knight, 1998, p. 7; MacIntyre, 1981, chap. 10; MacIntyre, 1988, p. 7). Second, Kant belongs to the school of liberalism—the principles of which are *baseless, moral fiction*, and an illusion—that makes morality unintelligible and our moral judgments like primitive taboos (Gutting, 1999, pp. 72-73; Knight, 1998, pp. 41-42; MacIntyre, 1981, chap. 10). Knight observes that for MacIntyre liberalism “in the name of freedom imposes a certain kind of unacknowledged domination, and one which in the long run tends to dissolve traditional humanities and to impoverish social and cultural relationship” (Knight, 1998, p. 258). Third, the content of Kant’s morality is conservative (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 44). Fourth, Kant’s moral philosophy is paradoxical (MacIntyre, 1982, p. 307). I now propose to respond to MacIntyre in light of those allegations. My aim here is not to defend Kant but to show that MacIntyre’s allegations against Kant are neither convincing nor acceptable and therefore his moral relativism/historicism cannot be considered as a good alternative of Kant’s moral universalism. My response to his allegations is as follows:

MacIntyre’s first argument is ambiguous since on the one hand he recognizes that the formulation of the Enlightenment Project is a great achievement in the sense that it provides standards and methods in the public realm of rational justification while on the other hand he says that the Enlightenment Project makes us all blind for the most part (MacIntyre, 1988, pp. 6-7). He focuses on tradition, culture, and history just as Universalists like Kant and Hare focus on rules. But what we really find in traditions, cultures, and histories is their variations. MacIntyre, indeed, tries to make a conception of rational enquiry as embodied in these three elements. I think such a conception of rational enquiry is not possible. Allow me to explain why.

Suppose there are different communities (could be *societies, cultures, or traditions*) like  $c_1, c_2, c_3, \dots, c_n$  with different ethical norms according to their histories. For MacIntyre, there is no necessity of a common ethical claim between  $c_1$  and  $c_2$  or  $c_3$ .  $c_1$  is right about its ethical norms within its socio-historical context and the same can be said of the other communities  $c_2$  and  $c_3$ . It can then be asked: What about the case of different members of  $c_1$  or  $c_2$  not having similar moral choices in similar situations? If all the members of  $c_1$ , different from the members of  $c_2$ , perform similar actions in similar situations, do all the members of  $c_1$  and  $c_2$  in their respective cultural domain or communities not accept *common* ethical norms? There are only two possibilities and MacIntyre is bound to accept one of them: Either they are the followers of common ethics and act indifferently and harmoniously or every member of  $c_1$  and  $c_2$  act differently in a similar situation. If the second possibility is true, then discussing morality in a social context, as MacIntyre does, is meaningless since

there is then no society, but only individuals. As MacIntyre talks about culture, history, and tradition which presuppose an existing society for the practice of moral actions he is not supposed to accept the second possibility as true.

If the first possibility is true that there is *commonality* within the community or society, then the virtue of *commonality* can also be justified as true on the same grounds within a single class of different societies. In that case, *commonality* becomes a form of *universality* against which MacIntyre’s moral historicism does not stand strongly and makes all his claims weaker. If the second possibility is true, then MacIntyre’s emphasis on morality in terms of socio-historical context is nothing other than a heap of absurdity and thus appealingly nonsensical. I suppose neither MacIntyre nor his supporters will accept the second as true, but then they cannot escape from accepting *commonality within society*, which obviously and indirectly leads them toward *universality*. MacIntyre has to decide where he stands. Kant’s morality does not give importance to the existence of different societies; rather, it gives importance to the element of *commonality* in ethical decision making by all people regardless of their societal and historical bindings.

MacIntyre seems to believe that Kantian morality is his intellectual design or construction: It has neither historical nor sociological content. In fact, MacIntyre seems to be justifying that historical and sociological content is always necessary for establishing a truth. If we follow MacIntyre, we must say that Copernicus’ heliocentric theory, Newton’s gravitational theory, and Einstein’s relativity theory are intellectual constructions because there is no (empirical) historical content in these theories. All material objects functioned (even today they still do so) in accordance with the natural law of gravitational power and the law of relativity before Newton and Einstein revealed these laws respectively in the 17th and 20th centuries. It can therefore be asked: What is the significance of Newtonian and Einsteinian theories?<sup>3</sup>

There is no answer in the MacIntyrean framework of understanding and interpretation of *rationality* as a basis for morality as he gives primacy to the *choice* over *reason*. Where is then *rationality* involved? To justify a choice does not really mean to exercise *rationality* because the justification may be based on desire and therefore be irrational. Newton and Einstein only revealed, but did not create, that the world functions in accordance with *such-and-such* hidden natural laws. Similarly, Kant revealed (and did not create) the fact that it is our rational faculty that governs our actions. Therefore, MacIntyre should revise his moral account based on historicism.

His second allegation against Kant is based on his misunderstanding and misrepresentation of Kant and his morality. Even if Kant is a liberal, though he seems not to be, what’s wrong in that?<sup>4</sup> What makes liberalism inferior to the communitarianism (better to term “*communal individualism*”) that MacIntyre seems to be in favor of? (MacIntyre, 1988; McCann, 2004, pp. 8-14.)<sup>5</sup> In most of his writings against

Kantian morality, MacIntyre uses harsh language that shows his condition to be that of a person who, when he finds nothing substantial to say on a particular topic, starts making personal attacks on his opponents: “primitive taboos,” “nervous cough,” “moral ghosts,” and “Kant led an isolated academic existence” are some of these. Such harsh language does not, of course, prove Kantian morality to be inferior to MacIntyrean morality based on historicism and traditionalism. If MacIntyre finds, as he claims authoritatively, the principles of liberalism baseless, fiction, or illusion, it does not mean that liberalism is really baseless or an illusion nor does it mean that everyone is a MacIntyre. As far as I can see, he does not provide any knock-out arguments for his claims.

As this is not an argument but an allegation, it is not necessary to respond to it; however, it can simply be said that not liberalism but the allegation against liberalism is baseless. Of course, it is irritating for MacIntyre as he is so strongly attached to communal individualism that he cannot cross its boundaries, and if he does try knowingly or unknowingly, his communal individualism will collapse immediately. As a Kantian, I would say that MacIntyre has tried to bulldoze the building of morality that Kant built in the 18th century with the common bricks of *rationality* to accommodate every human being inside not through sound arguments but by using harsh language, and tried to provide *one* brick to *one* person saying, “Take this, this is your part of morality.” What happened as a consequence is that everyone has his own piece of morality different to that of the others. His explanation of *morality* in terms of historicism and communitarianism has left everyone unsheltered and obviously unsocial. He has failed to pay proper attention to the fact that different notions of morality necessarily presuppose one notion of morality as a standard; he has not presented a sound argument against liberalism, though he claims that he has.

His third allegation is that the content of Kant’s morality is conservative, just as the content of Kierkegaard’s morality is. His argument claims that Kant is conservative in two respects: First, he belongs to Kierkegaard’s “predecessor culture,”<sup>6</sup> and second, that his project of discovering a rational will distinguishes between maxims of genuine expression and those maxims which are not so. MacIntyre needs to correct himself in his conception of morality because he has built a wall (that must be broken in a wider sense of morality) between *his* morality and the morality of *others*. This is why he does not seem to be coming out from the well (of communitarianism) into which he has fallen.

There are some other lower faculties like that of inclination, feeling, desire, and self-love that disrupt our rational faculty when making a justification for our actions. They (the lower faculties) bring a moral agent into a complex moral dilemma or predicament. This is why Kant says that one should always make decisions with one’s rational faculty, but not with the lower faculties, to avoid moral dilemmas and predicaments. As rationality provides a justification, there is nothing like a discrimination of one maxim from other;

rather, there can only be maxims more justified than others. Two passages of *Groundwork* clearly show that Kant is neither a conservative nor a formalist, but an intellectual, like Newton and Einstein, who revealed the root of morality. One passage tells us that

[I]f we attend to our experience of the way men act, we meet frequent and, as we ourselves confess, justified complaints that we cannot cite a single sure example of the disposition to act from pure duty. There are also justified complaints that, though much may be done that accords with what duty commands, it is nevertheless always doubtful whether it is done from duty, and thus whether it has moral worth. There have always been philosophers who for this reason have absolutely denied the reality of this disposition in human actions, attributing everything to more or less refined self-love. They have done so without questioning the correctness of the concept of morality. (Kant, 1785/1976a GMS AA 04:406)<sup>7</sup>

From the allegations made by MacIntyre against Kant and proper understanding of Kant’s moral philosophy, we come to the conclusion that MacIntyre belongs to the group of *those philosophers* who have criticized Kant without questioning the correctness of the concept of morality. The second passage tells us that

To be sure, common human reason does not think it abstractly in such a universal form, but it always has it in view and uses it as the standard of its judgments. It would be easy to show how common human reason, with this compass, knows well how to distinguish what is good, what is bad, and what is consistent and inconsistent with duty. Without in the least teaching common reason anything new, we need only to draw its attention to its own principle, in the manner of Socrates, thus showing that neither science nor philosophy is needed in order to know what one has to do in order to be honest and good, and even wise and virtuous. (Kant, 1785/1976a GMS, AA 04:404)

The two passages clearly reflect the idea of morality that was in Kant’s mind. In MacIntyre’s philosophical writings we can see how mistakenly he understands and criticizes Kant’s moral theory. In one place, he claims that Kant failed to provide a psychology to explain human goals and interests (MacIntyre, 1990, p. 187). In another place, he claims that Kant’s categorical imperative does not give human conduct any direction (MacIntyre, 1967, p. 197). These objections against the Kantian form of morality are not sound enough, therefore it can only be said that as an Aristotelian MacIntyre *must* fail in grasping the essence of Kantian morality. Gary Gutting correctly observes that “MacIntyre is particularly concerned with modern philosophy as an effort to replace the Aristotelian worldview, which had been successfully challenged by the new sciences of Galileo and Newton” (Gutting, 1999, p. 69).

Seyla Benhabib shows a mistake MacIntyre made in his explanation of “right” in a socio-historical context. She points out that he “gives voice to a long tradition of

skepticism” and that his “criticisms are based on a mistake which consists in identifying human rights with the social imaginary of early bourgeois thinkers” (Benhabib, 2007, p. 13). MacIntyre has made the same mistake in his understanding and explanation of “morality.”

## MacIntyre's AUT

In the first paragraph of “What Morality is Not” (MacIntyre, 1957), MacIntyre clearly exhibits his goal to reject the claim that all moral valuations are essentially universalizable. He severely criticizes Hare, raising several objections against his exposition of universalizability. In his criticism, he gives explanations for his arguments to defend his position. However, his objections and arguments don't seem to be strong enough to stand up against the UT: They are not well established and therefore seem to be unsound and defective. I will now respond to his arguments one by one.

His *first* argument against the UT, in favor of the AUT, is based on the example borrowed from Sartre's *L'Existentialisme est un Humanisme*.<sup>8</sup> The argument goes as follows:

In several cases of moral dilemma like that of Sartre's pupil's case, there is not any objective criteria to decide which of the two alternative actions one ought to perform leaving the second alternative action either less valued or morally irrelevant or empty. In such cases “ought” can be used purely in a performative and many other senses without making any appeal for universalizability. (MacIntyre, 1957, pp. 326-327)

Well! MacIntyre shows his strong inclination toward the phenomenological way of dealing with philosophical issues. He easily borrows an example from Sartre to show a moral dilemma (*perplexity* for MacIntyre) and comes to the conclusion that the choice made by the agent is not in accordance with any objective criterion as assumed by the Universalists. I then ask MacIntyre: Is it true that there is no objective criterion for making a choice for someone like Sartre's pupil in a situation of either escaping to England or staying with his mother? I propose an alternate solution to this moral dilemma. The solution is based on a Kantian application of a maxim that can be universalized. After comparing Sartre's example and another puzzling case of a moral dilemma I have constructed, I will show that what seems to be a dilemma for Sartre and MacIntyre is not a dilemma at all.

Suppose any person *a*, maybe you or I, leaves his office to visit one of his relatives, say *b*, who is hospitalized in the emergency room after a serious road accident just a few hours before. The *b*'s condition is critical: He is struggling for his life. The chances to survive or to die are equal. After a few minutes of driving, person *a* witnesses a serious accident of a stranger hit by a speeding city bus in the middle of the road. The stranger's condition is the same as that of *a*'s relative—a 50–50 chance. The bus driver sped away after the accident. There are people around, but no one willing to take a risk (due to the police investigation and legal procedure in

court), or better, no one wants to go out of his or her way to help the stranger. The question is “What *ought a* to do at this moment of time”: Help the stranger lying in blood on the road or go to the hospital to see his relative?<sup>9</sup>

If we apply what MacIntyre seems to claim in his first argument, in both cases, whether *a* stays with the stranger or goes to the hospital to see *b*, he seems to feel satisfied as according to him, *ought* in this case bears a performative sense and does not appear to be universalizable. But this is not an answer rather a result of some sort of arbitrariness in understanding morality. So if MacIntyre thinks that what he said is a good answer, he is mistaken. There must be (or should be) a definitive solution for these kinds of moral dilemmas so that other persons, even *a* too, can emerge from any confusion in determining his/her course of action. This is how we can resolve the issues of morality, politics, or religion which arise in the social sphere of relationships where two or more people are living together at one time. Of course, an individual choice does matter, but it only matters to a certain extent in a certain place and time: It does not and should not play any role in moral matters.

In his thoughts, person *a* confronts at least two maxims at this critical point in time: (1) He should stay with the stranger who is dying on the road or (2) he should go to the relative who is dying in the hospital. This is the real dilemma in the above example, which many of us have already faced in our lives or will face sooner or later at some point in our lives since we are all bound to continue on our life's journey. Obviously, *a* confronts the two maxims even if he does not have any pre-notion of morality. So what should he do? Should he act according to Maxim 1 or Maxim 2? MacIntyre would say that person *a* may choose any of the two alternatives. What is the basis for his answer? Is it not a suggestion for making arbitrary choices of action?

Now suppose that *a* decided to stay with the stranger. His decision (possibly) came from a third maxim, associated with the first two: *one should always save a life* (*a* is used in universal form). Person *a* was in that place (on the road) to fulfill this moral duty and it was principally sufficient for his decision. MacIntyre may leave the stranger on the road to see his relative *b*, but I, like *a*, cannot because the basis for deciding to go to hospital to see *b* is nothing other than giving it the value of individual relationship. Some, even MacIntyre, may contradict me here by claiming that this is not a convincing argument since person *a* is losing another person (his relative) after all, and therefore, *a*'s stay with the stranger has no greater moral value than leaving his relative to die.

The objection is natural but quite general: It does not stand well since the third maxim “one should always save a life” does not presuppose any condition of choice from inclinations and desires of any kind. We cannot say that the case of *a* deciding to stay with the stranger and not to go to see his relative is similar to the case of *a* visiting his relative in the hospital and leaving the stranger on the road: There is a clear difference based on the reason of temporality on the one



hand and of relationships on the other. As Kant's moral theory does not presuppose conditionality on temporality of space, *a*'s decision to stay with the stranger from his sense of duty is justified—there is no dilemma between the two cases. What happens if there are five relatives fighting for their lives in different hospitals at the same time when *a* leaves his office and sees *b* on the road covered with blood? In fact, a dilemma can neither refute universal application of *duty* as *duty* nor does it justify the arbitrary decision making of a moral agent based on individuality.

Let me come back to Sartre's example. Both MacIntyre and Sartre are wrong in their denial of an objective criterion (better to say *maxim*) in a case of moral dilemma. Of course, there is a maxim to decide that the pupil should stay with his mother. This choice has greater moral value and has an appeal to be universalized. The maxim is as follows: "Always help (better to say 'save the life of') a (*needy*) person both as a civilian and as a soldier." Can this maxim not be universalized?

Yes, it can be universalized, irrespective of whether the person (*in need*) is someone's mother, father, or a stranger.<sup>10</sup> What really matters is the agent's duty of a particular kind. In the above example, his duty is to help the elderly woman. The agent is on the spot at that particular moment in time to fulfill his moral duty. MacIntyre could be right in denying the existence of an objective criterion of morality in the particular sense of *morality* he has in mind, but a particular sense of morality is not the real sense of morality.

Discussing *morality* inside or outside the academic domain in an individual context is nothing more than a waste of time as the very idea of morality cannot presuppose individual preferences as its foundation. My moral actions on the Earth should not be different from my moral actions on Venus (if human life happens to be there). MacIntyre has mistakenly assumed that both morality and the role of moral agency can be assigned to individuals on the basis of their personal preferences. This is certainly not acceptable because a moral duty should be performed by all moral agents in all similar situations regardless of their personal circumstances: They can do this by following moral laws, not by following their personal desires or life patterns. Therefore, MacIntyre's first argument must fail.

MacIntyre's second argument is more theoretical. It requires a linguistic discussion in the philosophical domain. The argument is as follows:

For to adopt Hare's use of "moral" would be to permit only one way of settling conflicts of principles (that of formulating a new principle or reformulating an old one) to be counted as genuinely a moral solution to a moral problem, while another way—that of the non-universalizable decision à la Sartre—would be ruled out from the sphere of morality. [ . . . ], not all, but only some, moral valuations are universalizable. What leads Hare to insist that all are is his exclusive concentration on moral rules. For rules, whether moral or non-moral, are normally

universal in scope anyway, just because they are rules. (MacIntyre, 1957, p. 325)<sup>11</sup>

MacIntyre uses this argument against Hare, but it also goes against Kant. I doubt that this argument really helps him defend the AUT. The objections MacIntyre has made against the Kantian use of the term "moral" can also backfire at him and his favorites, the Existentialists, if the argument is turned around.<sup>12</sup> If Kant was unable to understand the sense of "moral," the existentialists weren't getting the sense implied by the Kantian use of "moral." And if they did, indeed, understand what Kant meant by "moral," they badly manipulated its meaning in accordance with the requirements for their own claim. In fact, it is the existentialist use of "moral" that cannot resolve moral problems and rules out the human need for *one and common moral rule* or *a universal rule*. Their use of "moral" is based on individual interests and arbitrariness whereas Kant is using "moral" in the *universal* sense (and this is the real problem for MacIntyre).

Let's suppose for a moment that MacIntyre is right in claiming that in some cases of moral dilemma, the individual choice of a moral agent matters and she may perform an action of her choice. What would happen if everyone behaved differently in the same situation at different moments in time? Consider this case: A person *p*, going along on his way, finds a wheel-chaired woman at the bus stop from which he regularly takes a bus to the university. On his first day to the university, *p* helps her enter the bus. *p* does the same thing the next day as well since the pick-up time is the same both for *p* and the woman. After a few days, it becomes a daily ritual that *p* helps her everyday. But what if *p* one day makes a choice not to help her anymore? Can *p*'s choice be said to be moral? Will the woman be left un-helped at the bus stop?

These are questions which lead us to think that we have a *common* choice since we all are or ought to be moral agents in certain cases. Kant is right in claiming that we must treat every person as an end and not as a mean. A moral agent cannot be categorized by her different social, religious, cultural, or geographical identity. One's *non-moral* (social or cultural) identity can be categorized on the basis of his place and relationship but one's *moral* identity cannot be. We can see this in everyday life. Kant, too, discusses the similar notion of one's moral identity in his classification of duty as *perfect* and *imperfect*, and *duty toward oneself* and *duty toward others*. It is not *p*'s duty, as an Indian or Australian, to help a person like the old woman on the streets of Heidelberg, but since *p* is a moral agent, he is obligated to do the same at all times and in all places: And that is the real difference between the MacIntyrean and Kantian senses of morality.

*Morality* is not to be used on a particular basis, but on a universal one since particularity involves arbitrariness and leaves all human actions open to dispute, partiality, and bias. Particularity can even prevent the possibility of basic questions of morality (what is *good* or *bad*?) being asked in the

public domain. Second, MacIntyre concludes that only *some*, not *all*, moral valuations are universalizable. Why not *all*? MacIntyre may find this question easy to answer since he has already provided a list of how the word “ought to” can be used in different senses (MacIntyre, 1957). For me, it is irrational to claim that a rational person should behave differently in similar situations. *p* cannot morally ignore the old woman looking for help to enter the bus in Germany, because *p* would help her in Australia—there cannot be two or more standards of morality like *Indian*, *German*, or *Australian*. Indian laws and lifestyle may be different from those in Germany and Australia, but the motive to have respect for laws, whether *p* is in India, Germany, or Australia, cannot differ: *p* must follow the law in all countries, or everywhere. The same can be said of *the* morality: MacIntyre and his ideals, the existentialists, didn’t think much about this sense of “ought to” as deeply rooted in all moral judgments.

Furthermore, MacIntyre claims that Hare focuses too much on rules. It can then be asked: What kind of scale is it that measures the acceptance of a rule of a moral (or social) being in numerical form? Is it commensurable that *such-and-such* a rule is accepted by *such-and-such* a person to *such-and-such* a degree? The commensurability of a rule in numerical form cannot be possible if it belongs to morality. In contrast, there are rules on the other side of the humanities and social sciences, for example in natural science, mathematics, and information technology, where it is easy to recognize that a particular rule is used to a particular degree in a particular case. This is not an argument against MacIntyre; rather, this is only to show that it is not commensurable that Hare focuses too much on rules—and MacIntyre does not—when he talks about morality in terms of individual choice.

The third of MacIntyre’s arguments against Hare’s UT that seems to be very close to the second argument runs as follows:

The fact that a man might on moral grounds refuse to legislate for anyone other than himself (perhaps on the grounds that to do so would be moral arrogance) would by itself be enough to show that not all moral valuation is universalizable [ . . . ]. In other words, a man might conduct his moral life without the concept of “duty” and substitute for it the concept of “my duty.” But such a private morality would still be a morality. (MacIntyre, 1957, p. 328)

In addition, “It is possible that a man, who is not guilty of any weakness of will, may have two sets of principles—one to guide his own conduct and the other to appraise (better to say guide) other’s actions” (MacIntyre, 1957, p. 332). MacIntyre’s above argument has already been well challenged by Anne MacLean (MacLean, 1984). MacLean argues that since MacIntyre drops the notion of *duty* from his concept of *my duty*, he can say nothing about the way that other people act. She further argues that MacIntyre cannot morally approve or disapprove the actions of others since from his *my duty* concept, he “must regard all such actions as

morally indifferent” (MacLean, 1984, pp. 23-24). No doubt, MacIntyre seems to be talking about two types of morality in terms of duty: *private* and *public*. A short comment on his dual morality is also necessary here.

First, as we also find two sets of duty in Kant’s moral theory—*duty to oneself* and *duty to others*—the idea of the multiplicity of duty is not new. What is problematic in the above argument is that MacIntyre either fails to regard the concept of duty in his concept of *my duty* or he does not explain what *his* concept of duty really implies when he makes a distinction between *my duty* and *the duty of others*: It is quite difficult for a moral agent to distinguish between *his* duty and the duty of *others* without having a prior concept of duty applicable to both.

Second, we can ask MacIntyre what is the criterion to decide that a particular act is *my* duty, not the duty of *others*? If there is any such criterion, is that criterion objective or subjective? If it is objective, what is it? If it is subjective, is it self-love, desire, feeling; if none of these then what? MacIntyre seems to not say even a single word on this aspect of the problem related to the concept of duty.

Third, it is possible that a particular kind of *my duty* at a certain time  $t_1$  could be a duty of  $p_2$  at  $t_2$ , of  $p_3$  at  $t_3$  . . . and of  $p_n$  at  $t_n$ . If this is so, “my duty” becomes “duty of others” but then a notion of *one duty for many people* whatever that notion is arises. Furthermore, this *one duty for many people* does or can become *one duty for everyone* in a particular time and space. Therefore, Kant’s appeal to universal moral principles should be understood in this way of understanding moral duty, not in MacIntyre’s way.

In addition, MacIntyre’s speaking of *my duty* is like saying *my politics*, but one cannot understand what *politics* means in *my politics* without having a common notion of *politics*. It also seems to me that his socio-historical definition of morality is self-contradictory. A MacIntyrean agent would say at a certain point: “I’m a *moral/social being* and ‘this’ is *my morality/society*.” Here, the agent’s acceptance of being a moral/social being on the one hand and his acceptance of *my morality/society* on the other seems to be contradictory as he seems to be claiming that he belongs to a general class/category of a moral/social space and at the same time denying it based on the claim to his *personalized* moral/social space. His fourth argument runs as follows:

More commonly, however, non-universalisable judgments occur when a man finds that the concept of “duty” has limits which render it useless in certain situations of moral perplexity. Such is the example of Sartre’s pupil. And such are the cases at the other end of our scale where moral valuations must be non-universalizable, where it is logically impossible to universalize. This is the case with what the theologians call “works of supererogation.” (MacIntyre, 1957, p. 328)

This argument implies that the need for moral universalizability is a logical impossibility and that the exercise to make

a claim for the universalizability of moral judgments is not different from the works of supererogation or an effort beyond the call of duty. The second implication of the argument reminds me of Marcia A. Baron who deals with similar criticism of Kantian morality and defends Kant's ethics in her own philosophical manner arguing against the supererogationist thesis. The supererogationist thesis holds that "any ethical theory that does not leave room for the supererogatory is *ipso facto* flawed" (Baron, 1995, p. 4). The supererogationists may argue that Kant's theory is also flawed as it does not leave room for supererogation. Baron's response comes as a recommendation to the supporters of the supererogationist theory: "Kant's classification of imperfect duties offers a promising approach to the moral phenomena that are usually thought to require the category of the supererogatory" (Baron, 1995, p. 4).

My response to MacIntyre's criticism of Kant's moral theory in terms of supererogation is in question form: What type of scale is it that finds moral universalizability to be a logical impossibility? Is the exclusion of the common concept of "duty" from the domain of morality that brings us to the conclusion that moral universalizability is logically impossible. In addition, we can ask MacIntyre: What criterion has he used to make a sharp distinction between what morality *is* and what it *is not*? As far as I can see, no answer has been given by MacIntyre.

MacIntyre's criticism of the UT in general and Kant's account of duty in particular do not pose any harm to Kant's ethical theory as in all his writings on morality, Kant talks about the moral perplexities of ordinary human life. Are "keeping one's promise," "paying one's debt," and "not committing suicide" not examples of normal human life? Do these actions not manifest our moral and social conduct? Such actions as duties are, of course, part of everyday life. I do not see how "keeping a promise" or "paying one's debt" belong to supererogation. If someone cannot keep a promise, it is his moral weakness or his failure of acting from his rational capacity: One cannot simply categorize this act as supererogation just because one cannot keep one's promise or pay one's debt.

Many people commit suicide everyday in different parts of the world not because they are in great trouble but because they are too weak, in terms of their will, to fulfill their duty toward their own life. This weakness is not physical but psychological, or better, moral. As MacIntyre's argument is based on the misunderstanding of the term "moral," it cannot be counted as a credible argument against Kant's moral theory: There is no place for supererogation in Kant's concept of duty.

MacIntyre's next argument states that the UT of moral judgments is a product of liberal morality, which seems to be claiming that everyone should be judged and treated according to the same moral standard. MacIntyre argues, "It is not part of the meaning of 'morality' *tout court* that moral valuations are universalizable, but liberals tend to use the word 'morality' in such a way that this is made part of its meaning"

(MacIntyre, 1957, p. 332). This is in fact a different version of his second argument under the name of *liberal morality*. My response to this argument is that it is not liberal morality but common human life that requires a universal form of morality. We live in a society where everyone is equally important and only common rules can help us settle the problems that emerge in the moral, social, and political spheres. Some may argue that this claim might be sufficient to deal with acts based on (moral) norms but this sometimes does not help us settle some morally problematic cases in the society. Stealing, for instance, is taken to be "morally bad" and honesty to be "morally good," but nonetheless, there are cases where "honesty" will be taken to be "morally bad." For example, it may not be morally good for a person to be honest in a situation when he knows that revealing a fact can ruin a good relationship between two people. I don't think this is an argument to be taken seriously as the argument lays an emphasis on situational morality which does not have a strong basis to be established on.

Morality does not involve attributes. There is no such thing of *good morality*, *bad morality*, *liberal morality*, or *strict morality*. Categorization of morality like this has no meaning in itself. However, the essence of morality should be universal in order to make people realize that they belong to the same realm of morality. *Morality* cannot be classified on the basis of one's culture, caste, and creed: That mistaken argument is the work of those who fight at a linguistic level to define "morality" in the socio-historical context—they ignore the inherent element of *universalizability* that belongs to morality.

MacIntyre's next argument against the UT is more easily shown to be mistaken in its interpretation of Kantian morality. Most likely, MacIntyre assumes that a universal moral judgment is impersonal because of its objective status. With this assumption, he argues that an impersonal moral judgment can neither be approved nor disapproved (MacIntyre, 1957, p. 333). This argument has been discussed and criticized by W. K. Frankena, so I will refrain from commenting on it. Frankena states that like other contemporary philosophers, MacIntyre has made "a mistake of thinking that to define 'moral' is also to define 'ought to.'" Frankena rightly argues that "when we speak of moral action (as versus immoral action) we mean action which is right or obligatory" and that "what is in question is the meaning of 'moral' as applied to judgments, and here 'moral' is not equivalent to 'right' or 'obligatory'" (Frankena, 1958, p. 158). Thus, MacIntyre's account of morality is of no help in a broader sense of moral space—his arguments are simply weak and loaded with conceptual defects.

### MacIntyre's Moral Historicism and the Question of Moral Orientation

MacIntyre has tried to defend a kind of moral historicism, which implies that moral truth is relative to one's *cultural* or *traditional* history. Since MacIntyre's account of morality



entails that the truth of moral judgments depends upon tradition and history, his theory no doubt entails moral relativism. Relativism is an attractive idea that can help us to explain historical differences in moral discussions, but it does not explain similarities that we do or can see in the idea of morality in *strong* sense in different societies and communities. Morality in strong sense is/should be common to all.

MacIntyre seems to claim that the criterion for determining morality is tradition or history dependent. He cannot escape from the trap of traditional relativism that is, in fact, a kind of cultural relativism since traditions vary from culture to culture and time to time. Even his concept of rationality within the boundaries of tradition is subject to change. In *After Virtue*, he seems to assert that morality is tradition-bound and argues that the concept of morality can be assessed and evaluated in the culture in which the concept has been developed. This assertion implies the priority of *traditional* morality over *common* morality. In fact in his writings and arguments, he has promoted culturalism and traditionalism against universalism and Kantianism. However, he tries to universalize his theory of moral historicism on the grounds of some rational justifications but since “rationality” for him is also tradition-bound and hence relative, his attempt has failed.

It can be asked: What is the foundation of moral orientation—*reason* or *history*? By the phrase moral orientation, I mean the ability to locate oneself as a moral agent in a given space in terms of determining a course of action. MacIntyre seems to be moving between the concepts of traditionalism and historicism to make use of their respective accounts of “moral orientation” and its determining reasons (Allen, 1997; Lutz, 2004). He has developed his idea of moral orientation on the basis of traditionalism, which he has tried to justify in his overall account of rationality and morality. As a neo-Aristotelian, he has found traditionalism an easy vehicle to carry virtue ethics and the dominating elements of Western tradition. But as expected, his traditionalism has been severely criticized. Susan Moller Okin has criticized him for defending traditions such as Aristotelianism and Thomism (Okin, 1989, chap. 3). Lisa Bellantoni has criticized him for not being clear in his position as, she has observed, he sometimes seems to be a realist while defending Aristotelianism and sometimes a constructivist while arguing for other traditions (Bellantoni, 2000, p. 33; Myers, 2001, p. 253).

The question is whether history or tradition can provide the foundation for moral orientation. If we apply a general notion of “moral orientation,” our answer will be affirmative since a child learns morality and moral practices from family, culture, and tradition. MacIntyre seems to be treating everyone like a child and justifying their historical orientation as fully rational. Interestingly, he seems to forget that moral agents are not children. They have their own cognitive faculties to take ethical decisions. A tradition can characterize an action as moral on historical grounds, but it cannot justify that action as moral with sound arguments because a

justification comes from the cognitive faculty, which takes ethical decision on moral principles that are objectively valid, not from tradition or history. Of course the practice of a particular action may be good for the growth of a tradition but the growth and goodness of tradition do not justify that action as moral either.

More precisely, we can learn lessons in morality from traditions and histories and also act according to them to the satisfaction of the tradition and community to which we individually belong. We can satisfy our desires and feelings through those actions that are determined as moral by orientation in MacIntyre’s sense, but we certainly cannot satisfy our *reason* since *reason* does not take decisions from desires and feelings; rather, it takes decisions from principles that are given to itself by itself and for itself. Can slavery be justified as moral even if slaves are fairly treated? Of course not, but was it not once justified by the Greeks in ancient times?

What is the foundation that determines moral orientation? In Kant’s reply, it is human *reason* since tradition and revelation cannot be grafted without the agreement of *reason*. He considers “reason” as the only source of orientation in thinking and does not say anything directly about moral orientation. However, his account of reason-based orientation in thinking is also the foundation for orientation in acting or, so to speak, moral orientation. He is of the opinion that reason-based orientation determines one’s assent according to a subjective principle on which to act (Kant, 1786/1976b WDO AA 08:136). Orientation through thinking means to find out truth in one’s self. It is a kind of self-inquiry one makes in search of the basis for one’s own beliefs and assumptions. Kant seems to be claiming that one who has rational capacity can definitely question oneself in terms of determining one’s courses of action (Kant, 1786/1976b WDO, AA 08:146-147).

When one’s reason participates in moral orientation, one knows who he *is* and what he *ought to* do in moral matters. He does not need a justification from his tradition or history. Kant rightly claims that reason is the basis for orientation not only for a speculative thinker but also for the ordinary man who has morally sound *reason*. Through his reason-based orientation, an ordinary man can realize the end to which he is destined and determine his course of moral action which may lead toward that end. In this process, not his tradition or history but his reason plays a major role. John Rawls correctly observed the Kantian idea of reason-based orientation as an idea which “belongs to reason and reflection (both theoretical and practical) to orient us in the (conceptual) space, say, of all possible ends, individual and associational, political and social” (Kelly, 2001, p. 3).

Traditional and historical orientation is based on beliefs that people generally have. It can be asked whether those beliefs are reason oriented. If they are not then how can they help people who possess reason as determining a foundation to orient themselves on? Once a person orients himself in his reason, he can realize his autonomy, will, freedom, and his



identity as a moral agent. How can traditionalism and historicism provide a foundation for moral orientation? MacIntyre has mistakenly thought that historical beliefs are the same as rational beliefs. And he seems to be claiming that what is based on historical belief can be fully justified. This is not true. In Kant's own words,

[T]he situation with respect to a rational belief is different from that of a historical belief, for in the latter it is always possible that proofs to the contrary may be found, and we must always hold ourself in readiness to change our opinion when our knowledge of the objects is extended. (Kant, 1786/1976b, WDO, AA 08:142)

No doubt, the foundation for moral orientation is one's own reason and autonomy. A person can have many traditional and historical identities, for instance of being a father, mother, Indian, German, professor, singer, and so forth. But he cannot have several identities as a moral agent. He can realize his moral agency only through his own reason. As MacIntyre, and also other moral relativists, does not consider reason to be a primary basis for moral orientation, his moral account seems to be flawed. On the other hand, Kant's proposal for reason-based moral orientation is strong enough for acceptance.

## A Concluding Note

I have presented in brief an account of MacIntyre's moral theory and argued that he follows Aristotelian ethics and do not accept moral judgments as universal. He defends a kind of moral relativism, hard or soft, and moral historicism. But we have seen why MacIntyre's objections against Kant's theory are not scholarly. Most of his objections are of the same kind. I have also shown that MacIntyre's claim against the UT to defend the AUT is not acceptable because of its many conceptual flaws. For this reason, the MacIntyrean model of morality is hard to accept since he has weaker arguments than Kant. Instead of giving priority to reason-based orientation, he gives priority to history-based orientation.

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## Notes

1. MacIntyre never claims that he is proposing any thesis of this kind, but his writings and lectures certainly seem to be making a claim for the anti-universalizability thesis.
2. I have tried my best to locate his moral position while going through his writings; however, it is quite possible that some

elements of his moral position have been left unnoticed for which I ask the reader's forgiveness.

3. Schneewind observes that MacIntyre's lines of arguments to defend his revised Aristotelian ethics are based on a striking discrepancy between his treatment of morality and his treatment of science. Schneewind's examination of MacIntyrean morality also helps us understand that his historicism has no strong basis for establishing it. See Schneewind (1983, pp. 525-542).
4. I propose to recognize Kant as a *Unitarian* as it was he who recognized everyone as equal on the basis of inherent properties of rational decision making in every human being and he also tried to unite humans.
5. MacIntyre seems to have advocated what I call "communal individualism," which is of course different from liberal individualism in a sense that the former accepts individuals as the main determinants of communal and social flourishing considering communitarian morality a form of subjective morality that varies from community to community whereas the later is a belief in individuals' liberty and their rights in relation to their will to exercise their full freedom and rights. McBride (2006) argues that MacIntyre's conception of human flourishing favors a kind of collectivistic individualism.
6. *Predecessor culture* is a technical term for MacIntyre referring to the 17th- and 18th-century enlightenment philosophers. It is a sociological phrase he has used to refer the society before and/or of the Enlightenment Project of justifying morality. See *After Virtue*.
7. Kant's texts are cited according to the Akademie Edition of his works. See Lewis W. Beck (1976) for the English translation of Kant's works cited in this article.
8. In Sartre's famous example, one of his pupils was confronted during the war with the alternatives of leaving France to join de Gaulle or staying to look after his mother. His brother had been killed in the German offensive in 1940 and his father was a collaborator. These circumstances had left him with a strong feeling that he was responsible as a patriot and that they had left his mother in a state of almost complete dependence upon him. What should he do? Stay with his mother or escape to England? MacIntyre (1957, p. 326).
9. Some may argue that the case presented here does not specify *a*'s arriving to the hospital at a certain time might help in the chances of getting well and *if* this is the case, *then* the important question would be *if a*'s arriving to the hospital in time might save *b* from dying, then the narrative *one should save a life* will equally be applicable to both cases. Hence, they ask which of these two actions—to *rush to the hospital* or to *save the stranger*—will be more moral and which can express a moral rule? My response to this argument is that the argument is very weak and is based on a mistake in understanding the case of making a choice between *rushing to the hospital* for extending moral support to the relative who is already on medical care and *saving the stranger* by helping him to get the medical aid urgently required in that situation. It is clear in the case that "to save the stranger" is more moral and becomes a moral duty based on a (universalizable) maxim "save a life if you can."
10. Some may object that my position here seems extremely implausible based on a difference in our criteria: They seem to be determining the plausibility of an action in terms of *what one can do*, while I determine the plausibility of an action in

terms of *what one ought to do*. Let's let the readers decide which criterion is more appealing.

11. If MacIntyre claims that there are more than one sense of moral, his notion of morality is then fractured and subjective. His claim although helps him relativize both *moral* and *moral-ity* in the historical and social contexts but he fails to provide us a fix criterion for it.
12. The debate is based on the imaginary construction of a dialogue between a "Kantian" and an "Existentialist." See Hare (1972/1954-1955, p. 21); also MacIntyre (1957, p. 325).

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