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Document Version

Accepted author manuscript

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Citation for published version (APA):

McMylor, P. (2019). MacIntyre's Critique of the Performative Legitimation of Capitalist Modernity. *Acta Philosophica: rivista internazionale di filosofia*, 28(2), 225-240.
<https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=7094630>

Published in:

Acta Philosophica: rivista internazionale di filosofia

Citing this paper

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MacIntyre's Critique of the Performative Legitimation of Capitalist

Modernity

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Abstract

This paper sets out to explore the work of the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre in relation to his profound criticisms of the social and economic order of modern capitalist modernity. The paper begins by setting his broad intellectual trajectory within the context of the emergence of the British New Left in the late 1950s and early 1960s. It highlights the continuing significance of some of the key themes explored by the New Left throughout all of MacIntyre's work and especially regarding his latest work *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity* published in 2016. The paper attempts to bring out the significant role that MacIntyre gives to sociological analysis within his account of modernity and notes the importance of such analysis within what otherwise appears to be his purely philosophical approach and points towards MacIntyre's work being a form of moral philosophy rooted in social practices that is especially congenial to sociology.

Key words: Alasdair MacIntyre, New Left, Compartmentalisation, Capitalism, Morality

...those with the most power and money have been able to immunize themselves from risk, while by their decisions and actions exposing the weakest and most vulnerable to risk and making them pay the costs, when those decisions and actions go astray. They have identified themselves as having an interest that can only be served and a status that can only be preserved if the common goods of family, workplace, and school are not served. Disagreement with them and with those theorists dedicated to the preservation of the economic and political order in which they flourish is therefore of a very different kind from most other theoretical and philosophical disagreements. It is and should be pursued as a prologue to prolonged social conflict.

Alasdair MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, (2016, p.219-220)

MacIntyre published his latest book, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, in 2016, some 56 years after the publication in 1960 of the book *Out of Apathy* (EP.Thompson, 1960) to which he was a contributor and which can be seen to mark the emergence of what became known as the New Left in Britain. It was the first of a series of what eventually became, *New Left Books*, which was the publishing house of the journal *New Left Review*. *Out of Apathy* contained the work of engaged political intellectuals who offering a sustained criticism of the new ‘affluent’, capitalist society they saw around them.¹ Comparing the two books and the long distance in time that separates them one cannot but be struck that for all the extraordinary intellectual development and real changes that MacIntyre has undergone- not least his strong articulation of his commitment to Aristotelian-Thomism- in the intervening years, that the

¹ The contributors to this volume, apart from MacIntyre, were: the historians E,P,Thompson and Ralph Samuel, the sociologists Stuart Hall and Peter Worsley, the economist Kenneth Alexander and Norman Birnbaum also a sociologist and the only American contributor. With Birnbaum’s death in January of this year it means that MacIntyre, in his 90th year, is the only surviving contributor to *Out of Apathy* and one of the last remaining links to that remarkable generation of radical thinkers.

latest work is nevertheless, in some very deep senses, a continuation of key aspects of that New Left project².

What then was it that was distinctive about the efforts of those who called themselves the New Left? Partly, but crucially, they opposed the oppression of what claimed to be, in the 1960s, Marxist regimes, principally the Soviet Union and its satellites. However, what they also attempted to do was to critically analyze the apparently stabilised and affluent capitalist world around them in which the dominant forms of liberalism and social democracy understood themselves as having dissolved the problems of capitalist exploitation in a new welfare/consumer society. The New Left insisted that this new society was still a form of capitalism and that the problems of exploitation still existed, while also being alert to the new forms of experience and modes of life created by consumer capitalism. In *Out of Apathy*, Stuart Hall wrote of the new consumer society in an essay entitled ‘The Supply of Demand’, in which a crucial note of criticism is related to the quality and the form of the new life that consumer capitalism seems to offer. The image of the affluent society is one in which ‘the relationship between the “consumer” and the “provider of all good things”, the universal

² However it important to note MacIntyre’s strong practical and intellectual involvement with Marxism in the 1950s and 1960s in particular, and unlike the other contributors to the *Out of Apathy* volume, within a broadly defined Trotskyist orientation. See the volume of MacIntyre’s early Marxist writings edited by Paul Blackledge and Neil Davidson, (2008) and my own book on MacIntyre (McMylor, 1993)

breadbasket, is essentially a limiting, distorting one, reducing the individual from a complex contradictory human being to the sum of his private urges and aggressions.’

(1960/2017, p.62) Hall went on to note an important concern for the political impact on what he describes as the ‘two interests’ in society, that ‘between the working class attitude to sharing and community and the bourgeois attitude to competition: the one fed into and gave meaning to such political concepts as cooperation and common ownership: the other gave rise to veneration of the market, individualism and “equality of opportunity” .’ (ibid, p.66) Consequently, what is clearly of concern in the new social environment that seemed to be emerging in the late 1950s is that ‘ in so far then, as the “ladders of success” and the notion of “getting on” in its bourgeois form *do* reach into working-class life and we use education and other social processes to clamber over one another, so the “springs of action” in the working class communities new and old are weakened.’(ibid)

So what the New Left developed was not only the Marxist criticism of capitalism as exploitative but also the theme of cultural and political impoverishment that might block the development of a self -governing community of the future. These themes were notably present as a consequence not only of the Marxist intellectual inheritance of writers like Hall and Raymond Williams but also because of the influences of the

English literary critical tradition mediated by the influential Cambridge literary critic F.R. Leavis, and given a full and very influential articulation by Williams in his 1958 book *Culture and Society*. In regard to this tradition, MacIntyre's early formation drew from elements that would also feed into the Leavisite tradition via his exposure to cultural criticism that the English Dominican Friars introduced him to whilst he was a student in London (MacIntyre, 2013- indeed in an earlier and unpublished version of this paper MacIntyre explicitly notes their reading of the novels of D.H. Lawrence, a writer of course fundamental for Leavis, as a key source for their thinking). MacIntyre's latest book not only strongly endorses key elements of Marxism, with for example an explicit endorsement of Marx's concept of surplus value (MacIntyre 2016, p 96-97), but also gives the following description of capitalist modernity:

'It is often this cultural richness of capitalist modernity that dazzles its greatest admirers, while blinding them to its limitations and horrors, foremost among them the structures of inequality, national and global, that condemn so many to poverty, hunger, and exclusion from the cultural riches of modernity. But even those who are not thus condemned and excluded also commonly suffer from a deprivation, one of which they are equally commonly unaware. They are inadequately educated in how to make choices.' (Ibid, p.133)

The context for MacIntyre's claim about our difficulty with choices will be explained below but here one should note his concern, not only with capitalism's injustice, but with the issue of what it does, even to the persons who believe that they are doing well. Although MacIntyre's critique of capitalism's consequences is rich and complex, his core claim is that it gives even the most successful amongst us- perhaps even especially the most successful- a deep incoherence to our existence. This incoherence is rooted in the form of life that the process of socialization within capitalist modernity inculcates as a basis for making choices. MacIntyre here is arguing something more than the well known and established account of 'the self' within the societies of neoliberalism in which individuals qua individuals are viewed as responsible for their choices and if necessary can be held accountable for them. As MacIntyre notes this is something that many pre- modern cultures also did. However in modernity something subtly, but importantly, different happens in that there is an emphasis on the idea that

the standards by which individuals are to be guided in making their choices and expressing their desires are to be accorded authority only insofar as the acknowledgment of that authority is compatible with an affirmation of the autonomy of the individual agent.(Ibid, p.135)

At almost every stage what choice you might make is contestable and

radical disagreement about what is to be desired and when it should be attained is a deep feature of modernity. What is prized here is autonomous individual choice and what such a social order views as success is to be found in practice in the lives of individuals as member of economic, financial and political elites who have made their way, first in educational institutions, but also then within public or private work places in which

‘To be successful is to compete in such a way that it is one’s own preferences that are satisfied rather than those of others. So individuals learn to deal with each other as rational agents concerned to maximize their own preference satisfaction competitively, whether in market transactions, or in the arenas of politics, or even in the relationships and activities of their private lives..’(Ibid 133)

However within MacIntyre’s Aristotelian-Thomistic approach his critique of capitalist modernity contends that it is a radically truncated and inadequate account of how individuals actually do live. For capitalist modernity encourages a view of the world in which priority is given to the pursuit of individual goods and sometimes also to the necessary existence of public goods, but what is occluded is the pursuit of common goods. For MacIntyre common goods are those goods that can only be achieved by our participation with others such as in households, family

relationships, work etc. They might be called, social goods, for as he points out, ‘take away the notion of such common goods and what is left is a conception of the individual abstracted from her or his social relationships and from the norms of justice that must inform those relationships, if the individual is to flourish.’(Ibid 107) Hence in capitalist modernity we live with divided lives rooted in the social organization of our societies. [It is in the context that MacIntyre’s account of the necessity of a revived understanding of the significance of the virtues and a renewed understanding of ‘virtue ethics’ is to be understood. It is the discovery of the limited space that can be found for these virtues in modern organizational life that makes the articulation of them so subversive and indeed has led Kelvin Knight to argue that MacIntyre presents a ‘revolutionary aristotelianism’\(Blackledge & Knight, 2011\)](#)

What I have been discussing so far are MacIntyre’s latest formulations, largely within his 2016 book, however the statements and formulations in that work explicitly and implicitly depend upon the decades long analysis that he has developed throughout his long and productive career. It is only in this much broader conspectus that MacIntyre’s more controversial claims about the state of modern western societies and especially, but not only, his particular claims about the weaknesses of the anglo- saxon and also parts of the so called continental philosophical tradition make sense

and relate to his more general claims about the general cultural and institutional nature of capitalist modernity. This institutional setting involves both the exercise of bureaucratic power and its supervision of our compartmentalized forms of life that reflects the depth of the modern capitalist social division of labour.

Bureaucratic Individualism

The phrase 'bureaucratic individualism' has been used by MacIntyre to describe our contemporary culture. (MacIntyre, 1981, p.33) Before defining exactly what he means by this, we will briefly rehearse the condition of its rise. According to MacIntyre's critique, the key move is the rejection of functional teleology. In the European context, this means a rejection of Aristotelian notions in philosophy and science as well as allied notions in theology. The central concept of the classical and medieval tradition on this reading, was that one functional concept, the concept of *man* (the gendered concept is of course central in these historical contexts and naturally require later modern Aristotelian reconstruction) having an essential nature endowed with functions and purpose. Once such a vision is rejected then the way is left open for the kind of argument that claims no 'ought' can be derived from an 'is'. But MacIntyre notes that it is not just the medieval and classical world that

was the home of such concepts of functional teleology:

‘It is rooted in the forms of social life to which the theorists of the classical tradition gave expression. For according to that tradition to be a *man* is to fill a set of roles each of which has its own point and purpose: member of a family, citizen, soldier, philosopher, servant of God. It is only when man is thought of as an individual prior to and apart from all roles that 'man' ceases to be a functional concept.’ (Ibid, p.56)

However, the problem then arises for the autonomous self, freed from the constraints of natural or divine teleologies and the demands of an encompassing social role, is how it can give any substantive content to its own moral and social claims. Attempts are made to fill this gap in 19th century utilitarianism and 20th century analytic philosophy. According to Macintyre, these utilitarian and analytical attempts fail, but are, nonetheless, important presences within our culture. Utilitarianism fails because pleasures are incommensurable, we can formulate no real way of ordering them in terms of priority; no overall concept of happiness is available as a foundation for our decisions. Thus

‘it follows that the notion of the greatest happiness of the greatest number is a notion without any clear content at all. It is indeed a pseudo-concept available for a variety of ideological uses.’ (Ibid, p,62)

Analytic philosophy attempts to ground an appeal to moral rules on reasons which are objective. To be a rational agent, i.e. to be able to make appeal to such rules, one requires a degree of freedom and well being. Therefore, to be a rational agent you must have a right to freedom and well being. But rights are historically specific concepts. They are not general rules, because they do not exist everywhere, so they cannot be the minimal characteristics of a rational agent, i.e. objective and suitable for anywhere, which means we cannot move from them to general and universal moral criteria.

MacIntyre argues therefore, that both utilitarianism and much analytic philosophy are really unsuccessful attempts to save the autonomous moral agent from the Enlightenment's failure to provide secular justification of moral utterances. These two newer attempts at justification apparently did not resolve the situation that

‘each moral agent now spoke unconstrained by the externalities of divine law, natural teleology or hierarchical authority but why should anyone else now listen to him?’ (Ibid. p.66)

In this context we are left, if not actually in articulated theory, then in practice, with emotivism which later MacIntyre terms ‘expressivism’. (MacIntyre, 2016) We all continue to talk and argue as though some attempt to provide universal and rational foundations for our

utterances, had actually been successful. This leads to a very odd situation, for we all attempt to protect the independence and freedom of our selves, but living in our current situation we are inevitably involved in

‘modes of practice aesthetic or bureaucratic which involve us in manipulative relationships with others.’ (MacIntyre, 1981, p.66)

So in order to avoid falling prey to manipulation ourselves, we are, in effect, forced to practice it on others as we seek to incarnate within social practice our beliefs and aspirations.

Within advanced modernity, concepts derived from earlier attempts to provide rational foundations for our moral positions remain. Two central concepts for understanding 'bureaucratic individualism' are 'rights' and 'utility'. Utility haunts the bureaucratic and managerial aspects of our culture, but MacIntyre argues that the claim to understand what would constitute such a basis for utility, such as prediction and shared concepts of 'effectiveness', are based on faulty premises. On the other hand, the concept of 'rights' is used to express and protect our belief in our autonomous action.

Rights as implied by expressions like 'natural rights' 'the rights of man' and now, in our own century 'human rights'. It is assumed that rights

attach to human being because they are human. Regarding this concept of “rights”, Macintyre claims that:

‘there is no expression in any ancient or medieval language correctly translated by our expression in Hebrew, Greek, Latin or Arabic, classical or medieval, before about 1400, let alone in Old English, or in Japanese even as late as the mid-nineteenth century.’ (ibid.p.67)

Macintyre, of course, realises that this does not prove that no such rights exist, merely that they were unknown. But naturally, such widespread absence across cultures should put us on our guard. But in essence Macintyre rejects the existence of such rights because, he claims, all attempts to prove they exist have failed and in reality modern philosophers retreat to claiming them on the basis of supposed intuition. They may, of course, exist even if we cannot demonstrate their existence but as he dryly remarks, this argument could equally be used to defend claims about unicorns and witches! (ibid p. 67) They are moral fictions just as the concept of utility is: both are supposed to provide us with the objective and impersonal moral criteria that we lack.

The terms of 'utility' and 'rights' are the terms on which the culture of 'bureaucratic individualism' fights its political debates. Bureaucratic organizations make their claims within our culture in terms of utility whilst individuals make their claims in terms of rights. If this pair of

terms are fictions, then they are also quite incommensurate with one another. They are the forms of an unresolvable conflict. On this basis it is easy to see why protest and the feeling of indignation are prominent.

MacIntyre points out that:

to protest was once to bear witness to something and only as a consequence of that allegiance to bear witness against something else. But protest is now almost entirely that negative phenomenon which characteristically occurs as a reaction to the alleged invasion of someone's rights in the name of someone else's utility. (Ibid p.8)

The Dramatis Personae of Modernity

A key feature of the above argument is that, in some sense, aspects of modernity are deeply deceptive, in some senses it could be said that in regard to the operations of power a charade is being performed. In a conventional critical social science account we would suggest that MacIntyre is talking about the power of ideology and that he recognizes the claims of that analysis as part of what he is doing (Ibid, p.104) but instead of simply writing of ideology as distorting ideas and beliefs he presents us with an account of the deceptive masking of power via the exercise of what we can understand as the performative activity of key

‘characters’ within modernity.

MacIntyre’s famous deployment of characters to exemplify social forms might easily tempt us to understand them within this context of the social sciences as potential providers of scripts of social behaviour and in some measure this might be true but it does not quite convey the full range of MacIntyre’s intent. For in MacIntyre’s initial encounter with Gadamer’s work he notes the similarity in interpreting both texts and human action and he noted Ann Richter’s work (Richter, 1977) in suggesting ‘ that Shakespeare took drama to be the appropriate form for the representation of human life because human life is already dramatic in form,’

(MacIntyre, 1980, p.176)The characters MacIntyre deploys: the Manager, the Therapist and the Aesthete, help us see the moral dramas enacted before us and by us; ‘the Manager’, for example, appears as the key figure in the public realm of modernity and not least in regard to social scientific thought.³

³ One of the most interesting and, perhaps, surprising ways in which MacIntyre’s work has been taken up is in the sustained effort to develop it within the sphere of business ethics as for example by G.Beabout (2013) and G. Moore (2017).Ron Beadle’s work on MacIntyre and management is one of the most insightful to come out of the university business schools, and has been warmly received by MacIntyre ,see Beadle and Konyot (2006) and Beadle (2002) for important criticisms of some management theorist’s use of MacIntyre. On the general idea of viewing management as a form of practice that can be made better by the appropriation of virtue ethics I concur with Kelvin Knight’s assessment. ‘This is to misconstrue his entire project. It is to misunderstand what he says of the nature of human beings as reasoners and practitioners, of modern theory as

As MacIntyre puts it, in relation to Weber's influence on management and organizational studies⁴: 'Weber's thought embodies just those dichotomies which emotivism embodies, and obliterates just those distinctions to which emotivism has to be blind. Questions of ends are questions of values, and on values reason is silent; conflict between rival values cannot be rationally settled. Instead one must simply choose— between parties, classes, nations, causes, ideals' (MacIntyre 1981, p.24-25).

If the manager obliterates the manipulative/non-manipulative distinction at the level of the organization, the therapist obliterates it at the personal level. The manager treats ends as given and is concerned principally with technique, that is, how to transform the resources at his/her disposal into a final product, such as investment into profits. The therapist also has a set of predetermined ends to which to apply technique. Mental illness, frustration, dissatisfaction, and so forth are to be transformed to create 'healthy', namely, self-directed, organized, contented individuals in which the patient/client and the therapist become in practice managers of

expressive of the mistakes of modern institutions, and of "the irrelevance of ethics" to that institutionalized activity' (Knight, 2015, p.86)

⁴ On MacIntyre's analysis of Weber see the interesting book by Keith Breen (2012)

the modern self. But, neither the manager nor the therapist can meaningfully argue about the moral content of their ends.

So if the manager treats ends as given and is concerned principally with technique, a question suggest itself, why is the Manager believed not only by his or her peers and subordinates but by those in the wider culture?

In other words what might legitimate the claims of the Manager within our culture? Surely an answer must be offered by those in possession of objective knowledge of such matters- social scientists.

MacIntyre explores the affinities of bureaucratic/managerial power and social scientific thought in detail in his paper 'Social Science Methodology as the Ideology of Bureaucratic Authority' (1979) where he elaborates an argument concerning the legitimizing role of the social sciences for the bureaucratic manager. He argues that conventional social science methodology incorporates a very particular and limited view of the social world in its methodology, which in turn dovetails with the concepts and needs of managers and bureaucrats. He denotes five corresponding elements between social scientists and bureaucrats. Firstly, he claims the world is seen as composed of discrete and identifiable variables. Secondly, that the researcher can label these in a neutral and non-contestable way. Thirdly, that the process of conceptualisation about the subject matter, is a question of his or her scientific convenience

rather than culturally determined by social factors outside the discipline, e.g. 'operational definitions'. Fourthly, the researcher constructs law-like or probabilistic generalisations from the data. And finally, fifthly, the kind of generalisation sought, provides some lever for producing reasonably predictable events in society, in other words, it provides those with access to this knowledge and resources with certain types of manipulative ability. But the affinity of this conception of social science with bureaucracy only becomes fully apparent when we see MacIntyre's description of the bureaucrat.

‘First the bureaucrat has to deal in discrete items which can be given an established and unique classification... secondly the classificatory scheme which it gives rise to, which in an important sense creates those (discrete) variables, must itself be treated as non-contestable. The scheme has to be accepted independently of the evaluative viewpoint of particular individuals or social groups. Thirdly it is the bureaucrat who is free to create the classificatory scheme; it is he, who, so to speak, operationalizes his concepts so that items will be handleable by him in his way.’ (MacIntyre 1979,p.55)

Obviously these features of the bureaucrat correspond precisely to the form of the ideal typical, methodological scheme MacIntyre set out. In themselves, they embody the idealised self-picture of bureaucratic

practice. The same is true for the final two elements, because the bureaucrat must operate upon the classified materials, to produce desired consequences, so he or she must be equipped with sets of rules that correspond to causal generalisation. The operation of these rules then has definite effects, i.e. social manipulation.

It is crucial to understand that MacIntyre's argument is, in important ways, a performative one. He is not claiming that bureaucracy or social science directly corresponds to these forms, but that it is significantly important that they both exist together, in our culture, as modes of visible and performed legitimation. The claim is that when authority is challenged, or answers are demanded for a problem, it is to these cultural forms that appeal is made. In this process conflict is made both marginal and manageable, technique and modes of manipulation triumph over the claims of substantive value.

It seems, then, that we may well be in the presence of dramatically enacted ideology, dependent, like all ideology, on partial truths. There are built in features of uncertainty in human action, and the social sciences have turned more and more to probabilistic approaches, that, as MacIntyre argues necessarily fail to fill the expert gap.(see J.Urry, 2016 on the deep difficulties of social scientific prediction) According to MacIntyre's critique statistical correlations cannot alone provide a definite causal link between factors and the social sciences have inherent

problems in dealing with the repeatability of sets of events, not present in the natural sciences and this is to leave aside the inherent reflexive potentiality of human practice.(1973, p.335)

It would seem that the law-like generalisations that the expert bureaucrat or manager requires, are not available. Moreover, the other prior condition also remains unresolved, that is, that some domain of morally neutral facts, must be discovered by the expert bureaucrat. For even if law-like generalisations are not possible, cannot, at least, a manager or bureaucrat, claim to be in command of the 'facts', and hence, the unavoidable nature of reality with which we must live? No, because as MacIntyre sets out in Chapter 7 of *After Virtue* the 'facts' only emerge as a distinct realm unconnected to a teleologically given account of actions with the anti -Aristotelian analysis that MacIntyre has written to contest. So that in practice what counts as the 'facts' is another part of the drama of power in displaying performativity.

The Role's The Thing: Compartmentalised Modernity

For MacIntyre, the Manager is most successful in effecting performative deception if, he or she, has achieved the minimising of the discussion of ends, especially long term human ends. A significant part of the way

modernity's organisational culture helps achieves this is via the deepening of the division of labour and the fragmentation and compartmentalization associated with modern life into a series of particular roles and relatively distinct spheres of activity. In regard to roles, MacIntyre is deeply influenced by the sociologist Erving Goffman, whose influence on MacIntyre seems to have been partly mediated by MacIntyre's friendship with the organisational sociologist Tom Burns. Goffman presents a concept of the self which seems to be no more than a ghostly presence in the multiple roles inhabited by the modern social actor. 'The self for Goffman is a spectral one that flits from role to role, being no more than '“a peg” on which the clothes of the role are hung'(MacIntyre, 1981, p.31) But the self has not disappeared in Goffman; rather, it stands over and against each of its roles. Its sense of 'freedom' seems to reside in its relative indifference to any particular role and in an awareness of the ultimate contingency of each situation. How, then, does this vision of performed social roles relate to the process of compartmentalisation, and how, together, do they produce their profound effects? To respond, it is useful to look at an illuminating paper of MacIntyre's that is not so well known as he examines the processes of secularization understood as an aspect of compartmentalisation. It is useful to choose secularisation as an

example, as it also illustrates very clearly the priority that MacIntyre gives to sociological explanations in what appear to be matters of intellectual belief.

In a lecture delivered at Manchester University in 2001, entitled ‘Four Kinds of Atheism’, MacIntyre sets out to examine the development of atheism from the early modern period to the present and, alongside the various expressions of atheism, the corresponding theistic responses to them. The key distinction that he elaborates in the lecture is between three types of atheism that can collectively be understood as the atheisms of ‘active denial’, brought about by their ‘explicit and detailed rejection of the theist’s central claims’, and a fourth, contemporary form of atheism, which he terms the ‘atheism of secular indifference’. The fourth is the one that concerns us here.

This contemporary form of atheism has the character it does, not because it possesses any great intellectual force based on reasons and propositions, but rather because of sociological factors. The atheists of secular indifference, as he puts it, ‘inhabit the constructed social world of the contemporary bourgeoisie . . . [and] lead significantly compartmentalised lives, moving between such distinct spheres as those of home, the workplace, the school, the clinic, the arenas of leisure

activities, and the milieus of politics, each with its own roles for the individual to play and its own norms by which the role-playing is evaluated'. This pattern of life offers, he suggests, little opportunity for individuals to stand back from the variety of roles they play, 'so they might view their lives as a whole and ask how they should . . . evaluate them'. Thus, it is increasingly the case that there is no place where questions about the whole shape and direction of a life can be raised, that is, the type of questions to 'which theists and impassioned atheists offer rival answers'. Crucially important, he argues, is that religion—apparently traditional theistic religion — is not absent from this kind of social order. Rather, '“religion” has become the name of one more compartmentalised area, one type of activity for the hours of leisure, just like golf and aerobics . . . [and] whether one engages in it or not is a matter of individual choice. Such religion does not put in question either itself or the social world in which it is embedded.' So the relationship between who does or does not participate in religion is often implicitly understood as a difference 'between those who have alternative consumer preferences, not as one giving rise to metaphysical questioning and conflict'. In practice, then, according to MacIntyre, what emerges as the religious forms of much of modernity are in reality parodies of their traditional pattern.

Such a sociological pattern of analysis is central to MacIntyre's account of modernity. We can find almost exactly the same structure of explanation at work in MacIntyre's account of the contemporary failures of moral philosophy to gain a serious purchase and influence on contemporary ethical practice. This is spelled out in a range of essays, several now published in MacIntyre's two-volume *Selected Essays*, (2006) he sets out the sociological reasons for the central significance he gives to what he calls 'the compartmentalisation of role-structured activity'. He also adds two other subordinate sociological theses, referred to as 'the professionalisation of procedures' and 'the negotiated aggregation of costs and benefits' (MacIntyre 2006a, p.121-122{1992}).

What happens in regard to the professionalisation of procedures in respect of rights-based appeals within modernity, -rooted as they are in the intellectual and institutional triumph of various forms of Enlightenment liberalism,- is that they undergo in contemporary practice a professional and bureaucratic translation of these rights into technical legal definitions at work in specialised institutional settings. These are carried out by professionals who are, themselves, moving through role-based compartmentalised practices, and who collude to avoid consideration of the wider 'moral' or 'political' aspects of the cases with

which they are faced.⁵

MacIntyre gets to the heart of the matter of what is problematic in this compartmentalized culture of bureaucratic individualism in the following quotation.

‘This relative autonomy of each demarcated sphere of activity is reinforced by the degree to which in contemporary advanced societies individuals encountered in each particular sphere are often not the same as those whom one meets elsewhere. When one encounters each individual only within some particular sphere, in some role that is a counterpart to one’s own role in that particular sphere, then one’s responses are increasingly only to the-individual-in-this-or that-role rather than to the individual who happens to be occupying this role at this time. So individuals as they move between spheres of activity, exchanging one role for another and one set of standards for their practical reasoning for another, become to some important extent dissolved into their various roles’. (MacIntyre 2006b,p. 197{1999})

What is most problematic for a genuinely successful moral agency in such a context is best understood, MacIntyre argues, by noting what resources and virtues these moral agents do not have. They lack, in

⁵ I have written more on this in McMylor (2011)

particular, a standpoint that can pass judgments upon their performances in their various roles, and they lack the virtues of integrity and honesty necessary for exercising the power of a moral agent. This moral agent, he argues, ‘cannot have integrity, just because its allegiance to this or that set of standards is always temporary and context-bound. And it cannot have the constancy that is expressed in an unwavering directedness, since it recurrently changes direction, as it moves from sphere to sphere’ (MacIntyre 2006b, p.200{1999}).

MacIntyre offers much the same verdict when he refers to what he terms ‘the negotiated aggregation of costs and benefits’. Which has roots in the conceptual inheritance of utility theorists and aims at impersonal and interest-neutral forms of collective social assessment. These organized processes of assessment are faced by groups and organizations with incommensurable types of aspirations and needs. Thus, they only appear to produce just resolutions via a translation process into the bureaucratic and political forms of contemporary modernity. For as MacIntyre has recently noted:

‘What, then, are we in fact doing when we make decisions on the basis of cost–benefit analyses as we often do? The answer is that we are always working with some highly determinate and contestable conception of what is to count as a cost and what as a benefit in this or

that type of case and with some prior determination of whose costs and whose benefits are to be counted, whose costs and benefits ignored.’

(MacIntyre, 2016,p.77)

In effect the game is rigged before it begins in favour of the dominant interests of the societies of capitalist modernity.

MacIntyre’s analysis is perhaps even more pessimistic than it first appears. Indeed,MacIntyre does not rule out possible resistance by moral agents. MacIntyre points to the threats to moral agency within modernity, although not to its complete obliteration. Moral agency remains possible, and if it fails, it is we, as moral agents, who collude in that failure. A key indicator of this collusion and the agents’ moral failure, MacIntyre notes, is to be found in the newest entrant into the catalogue of the virtues, namely, the distinctively ‘modern virtue’ of ‘adaptability’ [and with it the implied disparagement of the traditional virtue of ‘constancy’ which as he noted in his paper , ‘Social Structures and their threats to Moral Agency’ a ‘prerequisite for exercising the power of moral agency’\(2006 b.p200. {1999}\)](#) . This,adaptability he observes, is often understood not just as a feature of this or that particular role, but as a feature of the individual as such. Indeed, it is difficult to think of a more frequently applauded modern trait. The emergence of ‘adaptability’ as a perceived desirable trait is significant because it reveals, not the complete

dissolution of the self into its various social roles, but rather the skillful management of a series of transitions by a still capable 'self', who is engaged, 'when well-managed, [in] a dramatic feat, an expression of the actor as well as of the roles enacted' (MacIntyre 2006b, 201). Such an actor can abandon the role and, in collaboration with others, frame a new one. If such a move was informed by a commitment to work within practices informed by virtue ethics, much more than role would be rejected, but also a whole institutional order.

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