



Resurrecting the Phoenix

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MACINTYRE AND EMOTIVISM¹

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Emotivism, the doctrine that all moral judgments are nothing but expressions of feeling, attitude or preference,² has been criticized by Alasdair MacIntyre in a series of articles and books.³ In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre criticizes emotivism as a theory of the meaning of moral terms but suggests that emotivism is plausible as a theory of the use of moral terms. Stephen Mulhall in his article, "Liberalism, Morality, and Rationality" detects a certain incoherence in this view. According to Mulhall, MacIntyre cannot maintain both his cultural analysis of the pervasiveness of emotivism *and* his arguments against emotivism as a theory of the meaning of moral terms.

In this paper, I will first present MacIntyre's arguments against emotivism as a theory of meaning. Next, I will present MacIntyre's account of emotivism as a theory of use. The third section offers Mulhall's criticism of MacIntyre. Finally, in the fourth section, I will explore the question whether or not MacIntyre has the resources for answering this criticism.

MacIntyre's Criticism of Emotivism as a Theory of Meaning

In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre offers three criticisms of emotivism as a theory of meaning. First, if emotivism is correct, then moral language is ultimately an expression of feeling or approval. As approval and emotion are of many kinds, a question naturally arises as to what sorts of feelings are being expressed by moral language. If emotivism is to be plausible as an explanation, then it must give a plausible account of the sort of feelings or approval expressed. For the most part, emotivists do not offer any characterization of the attitudes and feelings of the relevant type. If the emotivist cannot give any account of the relevant feelings, then the emotivist theory of moral language lacks requisite explanatory power. On the other hand, if the emotivist replies that the relevant feelings are 'moral feelings,' then the answer is vacuously circular. If emotivism is to explain the meaning of 'moral' language, this explanation cannot include a reintroduction of the 'moral.' Emotivism purports to explain moral language as an expression of emotional attitudes, but when one scratches the surface to determine exactly what type of emotional attitudes moral language expresses, either no answer is forthcoming or the answer returns one at once to the point of departure.⁴

Secondly, emotivism fails because it engages in the impossible task, writes MacIntyre, of "characterizing as equivalent in meaning two kinds of expression

which ... derive their distinctive function in our language in key part from the contrast and difference between them.”⁵ One can give two very different types of reasons as ground for an imperative, these being reasons dependent upon the personal context and reasons dependent upon impersonal criteria. If a reason given depends upon personal context, then the reason has motivational force only in so far as there exists a relationship between speaker and hearer such that the hearer has reason to follow the prompting of the speaker because of, for instance, fearing, loving, or wanting to please the speaker. For example, “Do such and such because I wish it” has force only if the one hearing the injunction has a particular kind of relationship with speaker. Personal context dependent reasons presuppose a certain kind of relationship existing between the one giving the injunction and the one receiving it. On the other hand, a moral reason, a reason based on impersonal criteria, has force regardless of speaker, or even if there is no speaker. Reasons given for action such as “because it leads to the greatest happiness of the greatest number” or “because it is in accord with natural law” are reasons that do not depend upon personal context or personal preference. Personal reasons for action rely on the personal context of the utterance; moral reasons for action rely on impersonal criteria. Emotivism fails because it tries to assimilate two very different types of reasons.

Finally, MacIntyre suggests that these errors come about because the emotivist mistakes the *use* to which many moral sentences are put for the *meaning* of moral discourse. He writes that, although emotivism purports to explain the meaning of moral sentences:

[T]he expression of feeling or attitude is characteristically a function not of the meaning of sentences; but of their use on particular occasions. The angry school master, to use one of Gilbert Ryle’s examples, may vent his feelings by shouting at the small boy who has just made an arithmetical mistake, ‘Seven time seven equals forty nine!’ But the use of this sentence to express feelings or attitudes has nothing whatsoever to do with its meaning.⁶

Emotivism then fails because it mistakes the use of moral language for the meaning of moral language.

Emotivism Understood as a Theory of Use

Emotivism as a theory describing the meaning of moral language fails, at least if the arguments above are correct, but emotivism understood as a theory of use, according to MacIntyre, is quite plausible. He suggests that emotivism may indeed be true as an account of the use of moral language, even if it fails as an account of meaning.

Clearly the argument so far shows that when someone utters a moral judgment, such as ‘This is right’ or ‘This is good’, it does not mean the same as ‘I approve of this; do so as well’ or ‘Hurrah for this!’ or any of the other attempts at equivalence suggested by emotive theorists; but even if the meaning of such sentences were quite other than emotive theorists supposed, it might be plausibly claimed, if the evidence were adequate, that in using such sentences to *say* whatever they mean, the agent was in fact *doing* nothing other than expressing his feelings or attitudes and attempting to influence the feelings and attitudes of others.⁷

For those using moral language in this way, the meaning of moral language would contradict its use. Indeed, in *After Virtue*, MacIntyre describes an ‘emotivist culture’ in which just such a contradiction of meaning and use is pervasively present. This culture of the economically advanced, liberal democracies of North-Western Europe and North America has certain common characteristics.

What are the characteristics of this emotivist culture? MacIntyre names several, the first of which is “the obliteration of any genuine distinction between manipulative and non-manipulative social relations.”⁸ If one cannot give reasons based upon impersonal criteria in organizing social life, then communal moral and political life becomes merely a clash of naked wills and base manipulation of one person by another. Furthermore, emotivist culture leads to the appearance of so called ‘characters’ in modern life who embody the obliteration of manipulative and non-manipulative social relations in various spheres of human life. These characters, including the Rich Aesthete, the Manager, and the Therapist, play a defining and central role in emotivist culture. Moreover, emotivist culture gives rise to a distinctive self-conception of personhood — the emotivist self which “finds no limits set to that which it may pass judgment for such limits could only derive from rational criteria for evaluation and, as we have seen, the emotivist self lacks such criteria.”⁹ Since emotivism adopts attitudes, preferences, and choices without any criteria, “it follows that the emotivist self can have no rational history in its transitions from one state of moral commitment to another.”¹⁰ The emotivist self defines itself in opposition to any social or familial relationships. Hence, radical individualism is also characteristic of emotivist culture, as is also a collectivism that seeks to restrain unbridled individualism. Emotivism, on MacIntyre’s account, informs much of Western culture — its social relationships, its defining ‘characters,’ and indeed its very image of the human person and human community.

Mulhall’s Question: Can Meaning and Use Radically Diverge?

Stephen Mulhall suggests that the first and second parts of MacIntyre’s analysis of emotivism stand in a precarious relationship. One sees a difficulty when one considers the presuppositions involved in MacIntyre’s claims. What is presup-

posed in the rejection of emotivism as a theory of meaning and the acceptance of plausibility as a theory use? Stephan Mulhall answers:

[The] distinction between historically determined objective meanings and the practice-determined subjective uses of our moral vocabulary is, of course, something that MacIntyre relies upon in his general explanation of our failure to perceive the true nature of moral culture. But he can only make such a distinction if it makes sense to believe that moral discourse and the practices with which it is intertwined can become radically discrepant with one another; and this in turn only makes sense if it is possible for the meaning and the use of words to diverge so radically that the former contradict the latter.¹¹

Can such a contradiction take place? Mulhall objects to any such radical contradiction and begins his response to MacIntyre by making reference again to the example of the schoolmaster. The schoolmaster, recall, vents his feelings by shouting, "Seven times seven equals forty nine!" Although the schoolmaster uses this sentence to express feeling, the meaning of the sentence remains unaltered. Meaning and use need not, therefore, coincide.

This example, according to Mulhall, hardly proves that meaning and use can radically contradict one another. The example is one of *local divergence* of meaning and use, not the global and systematic divergence of meaning and use required for MacIntyre's argument. If 'Seven times seven equals forty nine!' were to be used systematically and exclusively to express anger, and never in mathematical contexts, then indeed the meaning of 'Seven times seven equals forty nine!' would be synonymous with other expressions of anger, such as 'damn' and 'blast.' The expression would no longer have anything to do with mathematics. The use of the term would change the meaning of the term.

If MacIntyre is to maintain that meaning can contradict use in the relevant way, then he owes us an account of what fixes the meaning of a word without any reference to how the prevailing practice makes use of the word. He has not done this. Because this account of what fixes the meaning of a word has not been provided, we must jettison one of two claims. Mulhall writes: "Either [MacIntyre must] have misrepresented the meaning of our contemporary moral vocabulary, or he must have misrepresented its use."¹² In Mulhall's view, it is MacIntyre's account of the use of our moral language that must go. As the second argument against emotivism as a theory of meaning points out, we still use moral language to give reasons based upon impersonal criteria rather than reasons based upon merely subjective or personal preference. Moral language does not depend upon personal context in the way that requests to carry out personal preferences do. For Mulhall, the most radical element of MacIntyre's critique fails. It is not the case that "We are in a condition [of grave moral disorder] which almost nobody recognizes

and which perhaps nobody at all can fully recognize.”¹³ Our moral language, on Mulhall’s view, is in rather good order, with meaning and use fully consistent with one another.

Meaning, Use, and the Progression of History

Does MacIntyre have resources to answer this objection? In one of his early works, *Against the Self-Images of the Age*, one seems to find further support for Mulhall’s claim that for MacIntyre meaning can be systematically separated from use, and yet the original meaning remains. MacIntyre writes:

There have been times and places when a man who said “God give me patience!” would necessarily have been uttering a prayer; but a man in our culture who says “God give me patience!” may not be praying—for the practice of prayer presupposes a context of belief which is often now lacking—but expressing his feelings of exasperation. The words have not changed their meaning; but the expression has changed its use.¹⁴

At least sometimes, meaning and use do not coincide, and the same may be said for any number of other expressions, for example “God bless you” following a sneeze and “Go to hell” as a curse. These phrases are used to express concern and displeasure respectively. These expressions are, then, akin to moral expressions in so far as both can be used in a way unconnected with their original meaning. An atheist can say “God bless you” and a universalist can say “Go to hell” without incoherence.

Why not say with Mulhall that these phrases simply have lost their meaning? If one uses “God bless you” in a way wholly unconnected with theistic belief, the phrase gradually comes to mean something else, perhaps in this example, “Wishing you well.” This seems true. For instance, the original meaning of Good-bye in English was “God be with you.” The meaning of the word “Good-bye” in contemporary English no longer has any connection whatsoever to theistic belief, hence the word has indeed changed meaning. Mulhall is correct that the use of a phrase can determine its meaning.

There is however a middle way that Mulhall has overlooked. It is not the case that *either* meaning and use can only diverge locally *or* that the meanings of words are permanently fixed independently of their use. The claim MacIntyre needs is not that words retain their meaning permanently although they are systematically and solely put to other uses. He requires not this strong and rather implausible thesis but rather a weaker and more plausible one: words *gradually* lose one meaning and retain another determined by use. For sometime however, words retain their original meanings, while being put to uses sometimes in accord with original meanings and sometimes in discord with original meanings. The example given

above "God give me patience!" illustrates well the undetermined use to which certain phrases can be put. "God give me patience!" can still be used in its original sense though it may also be put to another use. Likewise, moral words have retained their original meaning to a greater or lesser extent which leads to a certain incoherence in contemporary moral utterance, the original meaning of moral language for the moment being retained but the common usage often in discord with this original meaning.

Emotivism, MacIntyre suggests, is an historically contingent theory that makes sense as the end of a process of degeneration. He writes:

Emotivism ... turns out to be, as a cogent theory of use rather than a false theory of meaning, connected with our specific stage in moral development or decline, a stage which our own culture entered early in the present century.¹⁵

Like many historical processes, the transition of which MacIntyre speaks takes time and will be for the most part almost imperceptible to those in the midst of the change. Linguistic transformations are often particularly slow, as is seen from the transition from Latin to the various Romance languages, a transition which took centuries and was, for the most part, so gradual as to escape recognition by native speakers.

A change in the meaning of words is, in the case at hand, further inhibited by two other factors. The first is that there are various sub-communities whose moral language, in both meaning and use, is self-consciously quite discordant with emotivism. Hence, unlike the situation in which "seven times seven is forty-nine" is used exclusively to express anger, even now a number of writers, presumably MacIntyre himself, Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, John Haldane, and others, retain moral language in its former usage. These authors, and their everyday equivalents, retard the progress of emotivism by changing the meaning of moral terms. Secondly, the proponents of 'modern moral philosophy', even if MacIntyre is right about their often 'indirect' emotivism, further retard the transformation process. Even if one holds that the Enlightenment project has failed, one must certainly recognize that it is a different project from emotivism. Richard Hare, for instance, may be an emotivist in MacIntyre's terms in so far as Hare holds that there are no objective criteria beyond the first prescriptive principles chosen to which one can appeal, but surely there is a great deal of difference between this position and the position of a Nietzsche. If we want to say with MacIntyre that in the Enlightenment project "Emotivism has not been left so far behind after all,"¹⁶ we should perhaps highlight that the inheritors of the Enlightenment project at least *seek* to leave emotivism behind. The recognition or final assertion that moral principles are in the end chosen by the agent is characteristically the outcome of a long series of modifications, clarifications, and advances made by the inheritors of the Enlighten-

ment and not the first premise of their theory. This 'indirectness' further retards the transformation that emotivist use of language seeks to engender.

If MacIntyre's analysis and my own imaginary response to the objection were correct, what could one expect to find in the further development of moral language along emotivist lines? Moral language would indeed begin to lose its original meaning and would begin to take on a meaning proportioned to its use. Plain persons, and not just emotivist theorists, would begin understanding and treating moral judgments and statements as non-cognitive; they would sharply distinguish judgments of value from judgments of fact; and they would claim that one should [!] not impose one's moral views on another. The process described by MacIntyre is an ongoing one whose final terminus, the change in the meaning of a word, is properly foreseen by Mulhall.

However, *pace* the suggestion of Mulhall, it seems clearly to be the case that we *do* often use moral language to express emotion. An emotivist culture may be typically modern, but the use of moral language to express emotion begins sometime before Homer. Should not the foreseen transformation of moral language have already occurred? The problem of emotivism does not arise from the fact that we use moral language to express emotion but rather from certain accounts of the relationship between moral judgment and the emotion expressed.

It does not follow from the use of language to express emotion that moral judgments are reducible to emotion. Rather moral judgments may be concomitant with emotion. Consider a question similar to the one that gave emotivism so much difficulty: When moral statements are used to express emotion, what sort of emotion is expressed? The emotions that find expression in moral statements are typically but not exclusively anger, sadness, and hope. Anger follows one's judgment that injustice has been committed against oneself or another. Sadness follows one judgment that some good has been or will be lost. Hope follows one's judgment that some difficult to achieve good can be attained. If it is the case that murder is wrong, and this wrong is one of unjust injury against the common and private good, then one would expect the emotions of anger and sadness to accompany judgments and statements about murder. If indeed both the common and private good are secured by respecting the autonomy of the individual, then moral statements about respecting the autonomy of the individual will often be used to express or be accompanied by the feeling of hope. Moral statements are indeed often used to express emotion, but the emotions in question characteristically follow from or are concomitant with moral judgments. Emotions do not create moral judgment. If this were the case, the use of moral terms to express emotion would not in itself necessarily be a sign of the decay of moral language. Contemporary culture may in fact use moral language to express emotion in a way distinctive from previous cultures and this is perhaps MacIntyre's point, but the use of moral

language to express emotion does not seem to be in itself a distinctive sign of
cay. As MacIntyre notes elsewhere, “Those emotive theorists who said that the
function of moral utterance was to evince emotion would ... have been correct if
they had substituted the indefinite for the definite article.”¹⁷

In conclusion, let me summarize what has been said. In the first two sections,
I summarize MacIntyre’s arguments against emotivism as a theory of meaning and
his account of the widespread influence of emotivism as a theory of use. In the next
section, Mulhall’s objection against MacIntyre is brought forward. MacIntyre holds
that the meaning and use of the moral language are, in contemporary Western
culture, often at odds with one another. Meaning and use cannot be so at odds,
suggests Mulhall, unless we are supplied with an account of what fixes the mean-
ing of a word apart from its use. Not having been given such an account, we must
jettison either MacIntyre’s claims about the meaning of moral words or his ac-
count of the use of moral words in contemporary culture. Mulhall would like to
abandon emotivism as a theory of use. Finally, in the last section, it is suggested
that MacIntyre needs a much weaker thesis about the relationship of meaning to
use than the one Mulhall claims he needs. MacIntyre need hold only that words
gradually lose their meaning when put to different uses, not that words retain their
meaning permanently when put to different uses. Given the nature of language and
escapes, this weaker thesis is much more plausible Mulhall’s criticism but never-
theless retains the insight that meaning and use can be in widespread contradic-
tion. Finally, some non-emotivist considerations are brought forward against
Mulhall’s suggestion that moral language is not used to express emotion.

Endnotes

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² Emotivism is perhaps best represented by Charles L. Stevenson’s work, *Ethics
and Language* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962).

³ See, for example, MacIntyre’s “What Morality is not,” ““Ought,”” and “Some
more about ‘Ought’” *Against the Self-Images of the Age* (Duckworth, 1971); chapter
18 “Modern Moral Philosophy” in *A Short History of Ethics* (New York: Macmillan,
1966), and the three opening chapters in *After Virtue* 2nd ed. (Notre Dame:
University of Notre Dame Press, 1984). For an example of his criticism of non-
cognitivism in general see, “Moral Relativism, Truth, and Justification” in
Moral Truth and Moral Tradition, ed. Luke Gormally, (Four Courts Press, LTD,
.994):6-24.

⁴ MacIntyre suggests a related argument in his article, "Moral Relativism, Truth, and Justification." "[H]ow on an emotivist or projectivist view [are] the attitudes allegedly evinced or expressed in moral judgments ... related to the assertion of sentences of the relevant type? Are those attitudes to be understood as psychological states which can be adequately identified and characterized prior to and independently of such assertions? If so, then the projectivist claim turns out to be an empirical psychological one and is, I believe, false. If not, then such assertions must be characterizable independently of any expressive function...." Alasdair MacIntyre, "Moral Relativism, Truth, and Justification," *Moral Truth and Moral Tradition*, ed. Luke Gormally (Four Courts Press, LTD, 1994): 16.

⁵ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 13.

⁶ Ibid. 13.

⁷ Ibid. 14.

⁸ Ibid. 23.

⁹ Ibid. 31.

¹⁰ Ibid. 33.

¹¹ Stephen Mulhall, "Liberalism, Morality, and Rationality," *After MacIntyre* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994): 205-224, at 218.

¹² Stephen Mulhall, "Liberalism, Morality, and Rationality" 219.

¹³ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 4.

¹⁴ MacIntyre, *Against the Self-Images of the Age*, 171.

¹⁵ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 18.

¹⁶ Richard Hare, *The Language of Morals*, 1952; MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 21.

¹⁷ MacIntyre, *Against the Self-Images of the Age*, 101.