

# **Traditional Morality Versus Enlightenment Modernity of 21<sup>st</sup> Century: an Evaluation of Alasdair MacIntyre's Moral Philosophy**

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**Abstract:** This work evaluates the influence of modernity on traditional morality using Alasdair MacIntyre's Moral Philosophy. It is no longer news that the 21<sup>st</sup> century world has lost the light of moral values handed over to humanity from generation to generation. Findings show that modernity has brought disorder and chaos in morality and has destroyed the already existing traditions. The penchant for modernity has become the order of the day. Moral decay today manifests in practices such as lack of respect for life and common properties, same sex marriage, mercy killing, suicide, surrogate motherhood, indecent dressing, prostitution, abortion, human trafficking, and child abuse. The researchers recommend the use of MacIntyre's tradition-based-morality to identify the loss of tradition in our society and to bring back to our consciousness the value of morality which will help us to live a fulfilled life for the good of the entire humanity.

**Key words:** Enlightenment, Modernity, Morality, philosophy, Tradition.

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## **1. Introduction**

Man can be described as a historical being. History describes the various deeds and achievements of the people over ages. History covers most of our discussions about the world. History takes our mind down the memory lane in retrospection as in re-presentation. This research work seeks to unearth one of the most fundamental sources of conflict in the society. There has never been such a questioning ground for the modern civilization (Enlightenment) in the practical life as the issue that confronts moral tradition. We need to bridge the gap which modernity has created. Naturally, there is in man the predisposition to seek his full realization in the society by maintaining the moral status quo which differentiates man as a rational animal. Society in turn derives its rationality and order in the nature of man. The elimination of moral tradition is a disservice in itself and as such does not promote the common good in the community.

People of the ancient and medieval eras were united with one common moral standard of laws. There were high standard of respect to values and morals in the ancient and medieval traditional community. However, with the birth of modernity, things have fallen apart and the centre cannot hold (Achebe, 1958)<sup>[1]</sup>. This is because the moral order we know and experienced has been punctured by modernity. It succeeded in unearthing endless struggles and in debasing of values. According to Osuji (1996)<sup>[2]</sup>;

Within the last few decades we have witnessed a different colour and sound of the society as on a screen. There is a kind of revolution, a transversing of the former order, a revering of previous ideas. The content of what people prefer to see, to hear, and in fact do, has quite changed (p. 55).

It seems there is no moral consensus on what is good for man. What were conceive as good in the ancient and medieval eras have now been thrown to the dustbin. The tradition handed to us by the early scholars in this field has been abandoned, rejected and dejected. Those things which are regarded as taboo, amoral and abhorred in the community are gradually becoming accepted by the society.

Every rightful thinking individual will agree that man has made himself the architect of his own destiny, the paradigm of existence. Immoral acts such as same sex marriage, incest, abortion, euthanasia, and child abuse have eaten deep into the fabrics of the modern society. This work therefore explored the modern approach to morality viz a viz traditional morality in the light of Alasdair MacIntyre's Moral Philosophy.

## **2. Clarification of Concepts**

### **2.1 Tradition**

From its etymology, the word "tradition" comes from the Latin word *traditio* which means action to deliver or to transmit. Thus, Pearsall (2001)<sup>[3]</sup> defined tradition as the transmission of customs or beliefs from generation to generation. Tradition is a very important concept for MacIntyre. He defined tradition as "a historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition" (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 207)<sup>[4]</sup>. He based his tradition on how to change the external challenges facing our basic beliefs. Hence he wrote;

The claim made within each tradition that the presently established beliefs shared by the adherents that tradition are true entails a denial that this is in fact going to happen in respect of those beliefs (MacIntyre, 1988, p. 388)<sup>[5]</sup>.

## **2.2 Morality**

Morality is derived from the Latin word, *mores* or *moralis* and is defined as the customs of a community accepted as the way of behaviour (Kerker et al, 2014)<sup>[6]</sup>. According to Durkheim cited by Kerker et al (2014), morality consists in the rules of conduct as perceived as both obligatory and desirable, the obligatory character of the rules derived from the moral authority behind them where their violation attracts sanctions. Morality concerns itself with and about how man should behave and live in conformity with some standards.

## **2.3 Modernity**

The word modern is derived from the Latin word *modo* from there the word *modernus* meaning “just now” was derived. It was used to differentiate Christian era from Pagan epoch around the 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D. The general usage of it came to lime light in the 17<sup>th</sup> century climate of thought with an ongoing debate on the superiority of culture between the modern and the ancient classical Greco-Roman. Modernity then connotes the rejection of the recent past and to embrace a new beginning.

## **3. MacIntyre's Tradition-Based Morality**

Alasdair MacIntyre is a Scottish philosopher, primarily known for his contribution to moral and political philosophy. He is one of the great moral thinkers of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. MacIntyre stands out as the philosopher who has offered the most profound critique on modernity. His rejection of modernist thinking was focused upon moral philosophy. There seems to be no more rational way in which moral agreement can be secured in our culture. His many commentators labeled his moral philosophy as "tradition-based-morality". His conception is that every morality originates from a traditional context of beliefs which were accepted without much questions and at the same time expressed in certain authoritative texts and voices (MacIntyre, 1988). He sees morality as what develops in a tradition. That is to say, that morality is trans-traditionally normative. This is because its principles express the power of human beings to move within a tradition of enquiry, to be involved in an argument in which certain fundamental arguments are defined and redefined. According to him, for morality to be rational, it must be found within the context of a community or a tradition that satisfies certain conditions.

Despite the rationality of morality within a tradition, conflicts, still exist and are inevitable. Thus, there is no tradition which escapes from some period of rational aridity or situations defined by the necessity of tragic dilemmatic choices. This period is one of the most important periods in the advancement of a tradition of enquiry. MacIntyre termed this state of crisis “epistemological crisis”. Maxwell (1993)<sup>[7]</sup> presented MacIntyre's solution to the epistemological crisis thus:

It involves the emergence of a new understanding of rationality that allows for the solution of these problems and the retrospective identification of how the previous understanding of rationality (morality) blocked such a solution (p. 387).

However, the progress of a tradition of enquiry is essentially dialectical. The superiority of the subsequent stage over a prior stage is judged in terms of how the understanding of morality informing the subsequent stage allows for the solution of problems which arose in the prior stage.

In summary, MacIntyre has it that it is only within a tradition of enquiry that morality emerges. His notion of morality as "tradition constituted" implies that the first principles of reason, expressive of morality informing a particular tradition are always intrinsic or internal to a tradition. Another one is that, the coherence of the philosophical positions held by tradition can be understood only in terms of the understanding of rationality informing that tradition.

## **4. Some Modern Moral Decisions**

### **4.1 Cloning**

Cloning has to do with the propagation of organism. Scientists were of the view that cloning occurs naturally in organisms including humans. They cite monozygotic twins or identical twins as typical example of a human cloning. Twins have the same genetic information because of the early embryonic division. A single cell may divide many times to produce a clone of cells having the same functions. Cloning takes place in this way; a cell (it may not be an egg) is obtained from a female and the nucleus of that cell is removed. Then a nucleus from a cell from the individual to be cloned is obtained and inserted into the enucleated cell placed in a uterus and allowed to implant and come to term. The individual generated in this fashion will almost never be genetically identical to the individual who was cloned. This is because the female who donated the cell into

which the nucleus was inserted will almost never be the mother of the individual who donated the cell nucleus. So many people don't have the knowledge that DNA is not only in the cell nucleus, but also in the cell's cytoplasm (known as mitochondrial DNA). A cloned individual now will have the nuclear DNA of one individual, but the mitochondrial DNA of another.

For somebody who will like to create exactly himself again. He or she has to get cells from his/her mother, duplicate her intra-uterine environment as it was in some years ago. He or she has to create his or her own childhood experiences during at least the first 15 years of the cloned lives, just to have a reasonable shot at turning out someone like himself or herself. So many bio-ethicists and theologians have reacted negatively on this issue of human cloning. Nigel Cameron quoted by Pence (1998)<sup>[8]</sup> criticized the practice thus:

Human cloning would be perhaps the worst thing we have ever thought of in the maltreatment of our species. It would be a new kind of slave class. You would have human beings who were made by other human beings for their purposes (p. 46).

Cloning raises a lot of fundamental questions such as: What if the cloning process turns out to be humans who are in some ways abnormal? Would there be no psychological harm in the future, whereby a cloned child is seen by his peers as 'freak'? How can one identify a cloned child or adult? Is human cloning going to reduce human genetic diversity?

Cloning can therefore be seen as a symptomatic of the most profound dangers that confront us today as life becomes a commodity. There are so many reasons why cloning should not be allowed. It will expose humanity to what may be called emotional risks. In this case, a cloned child grows up knowing her mother is her sister, her grandmother is her mother, and her father is her bother-in-law. Every time her mother looks at her she is seeing herself growing up. It will bring unbearable emotional pressure on a teenager trying to establish his or her identity.

Scientists should concentrate on cloning plants, varieties of fruit trees and flowering shrubs instead of cloning human beings. To clone a human being is to mutilate God's work of creation. It will certainly reduce the dignity of man and our moral conduct. Therefore, cloning constitutes one of the moral dilemmas of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is gradually turning and destroying some of the great values invested on human person.

#### **4.2 Abortion**

According to the Encyclopedia of Bioethics<sup>[9]</sup>, abortion is the termination of pregnancy, spontaneously or by induction, prior to viability. For Pearsall (2001) abortion is the deliberate termination of a human pregnancy. Pope John Paul II in his "Evangelium Vitae" (1995)<sup>[10]</sup> defined abortion as, the deliberate and direct killing by whatever means it is carried out, of a human being in the initial phase of his or her existence extending from conception to birth.

Abortion is a willful termination of the life of a living being before it reaches the viable stage outside the mother's uterus.

There has been an ongoing debate on the morality of abortion in recent time. Some people maintain that one has right to have abortion and that abortion is morally permissible and ought to be allowed by law. Those in support of the practice of abortion base their argument on some conditions that should be considered. Proponents of abortion argue that the mother should be allowed to opt for abortion: If the expected child will be deformed; if pregnancy was due to rape; if the child will be a great moral strain and social shame to the mother; if the health of the mother is in danger; and, when the child will be a great social and economic burden for the mother or family.

However, others totally condemn abortion as not only morally wrong but ought to be legally prohibited. The Catholic Church condemns abortion as an unspeakable crime since life starts from the moment of conception and the right to life of the foetus has to be respected. The church teaches that;

From the time that the ovum is fertilized, a new life is begun which is neither that of the father nor of the mother; it is rather the life of a new human being with his own growth. It would never be made human if it were not human already. To this perpetual evidence... modern genetic science brings valuable confirmation. It has demonstrated that, from the first instant, the programme is fixed as to what this living being will be: a man, this individual-man with his characteristic aspects already well determined. Right from fertilization is begun the adventure of a human life, and each of its great capacities requires time... to find its place and to be in a position to act (O'Rourke & Boyle, 2011, p. 40)<sup>[11]</sup>.

MacIntyre (1981) maintained that abortion is very wrong because it leads to the termination of innocent life. He further stressed that he cannot will that his mother would have had an abortion when she was pregnant with him, unless if a serious doctor confirmed that the embryo was dead. His argument then comes in that, if he cannot will that in his own case why must he deny others their right to life? He noted that;

If any life is innocent, that of an embryo is. If infanticide is murder, as it is, abortion is murder. So abortion is not only morally wrong, but ought to be legally prohibited (p. 7).

There is no doubt that abortion is practiced under the pressure of real difficulties but it is an unspeakable crime and evil. Human life is sacred and inviolable. Life is from God and no one has the right to destroy it. There is no reason to justify the deliberate killing of an innocent human being. Abortion is never a panacea for the eradication of rape incidents in the world. We are *imago Dei*. All forms of abortion are grave moral disorder. No law whatsoever can even make licit and moral an act like abortion which is intrinsically illicit and immoral.

#### **4.3 Euthanasia**

Etymologically, the word euthanasia comes from two Greek words *eu* and *thanatos* which means 'good' and 'death' respectively. It came to acquire its literal meaning as a good death, easy death or gentle death. It is also called 'mercy killing' (Ekennia, 2003)<sup>[12]</sup>. According to Peschke (1999)<sup>[13]</sup>, "euthanasia simply means the intentional killing of a tormented incurable patient by lethal agents or means" (p. 309). Pearsall (2001) defined euthanasia as the painless killing of a patient suffering from an incurable disease or in an irreversible coma. Therefore, euthanasia is proposed to eliminate the lives of the several handicapped, the disabled, the elderly, malformed babies especially when they are terminally ill.

Though euthanasia has been rejected by some Churches especially the Catholic Church, theologians, jurists, and some ethicists, with a new trend of thought, there is an increasing tendency to approve it in desperate hopeless cases. Some scholars like Peter Singer, Richard Brandt posited an argument that euthanasia is morally not blameworthy when a person is terminally ill; when in an unsound state of mind and when a person from a genuine sense of duty accepts euthanasia in order not to ruin his or her family financially. They justified euthanasia as very rational and morally right.

It is quite funny that it has been interpreted by modernists as a humane, caring and competent assistance given to the dying by relatives, doctors, nurses and pastors. Many people today advocate for it because they detached freedom from the objective truth about man. Their essential argument is that death is preferable to uncontrollable pain without hope and senseless misery. From the ethical point of view, all forms of euthanasia are murder, and are not justified with or without the consent of the sick person. Euthanasia is intrinsically wrong as it is against nature and our self interest. Life is sacred and as such it is very important that we allow each person to die with dignity and respect.

#### **4.4 Same Sex Marriage**

Traditionally, marriage is defined as a legal relationship between a husband and wife for the purpose of procreation. In other words, marriage was made between man and woman of full age. Surprisingly, a new revolution against the original nature of marriage and meaning of marriage has emerged. Today, our world is facing a very difficult moment with an issue, destroying some of traditional concepts. Thus, a good number of gays are getting into marriage, demanding, like others in the traditional state of marriage, an equal right and recognition.

Same sex marriage is a union between two gays, that is, homosexuals or lesbians. A union between a man and a man or between a woman and a woman has continued to gain acceptance in our present world. Same sex marriage is currently allowed in some countries particularly in Europe and America. It was in the year 2000 that the first gay marriage was witnessed in Holland to the extent that marriage certificate was issued to them. In most African countries, same sex marriage is prohibited. In Nigeria, irrespective of the pressure mounted by European and American governments, the government, catholic and protestant churches steadfastly oppose changing the tradition of marriage. The Nigerian government gave a legal backing to its rejection of same sex marriage through the promulgation of an Act prohibiting the practice of same sex marriage in the country. The Act known as Same Sex Marriage Prohibition Act 2014, came into effect on the 7th day of January, 2014. It prohibits and sanctions any marriage contract or civil union between persons of the same sex and the solemnization of such marriage or union. It also criminalizes the registration of gay clubs, societies and organizations, their sustenance, processions and meetings (Nwazuo & Igwe, 2016)<sup>[14]</sup>. The fact is that same sex marriage is sinful, dangerous and at variance with natural laws. It will result to nihilism and fatalism. Marriage between a man and a woman gives protection and growth to our world. So, no reason whatsoever would justify the legalization of same sex marriage.

### **5. Evaluation**

History corroborates the teaching of the conception that only in the maturity of reality does the ideal appear as counterpart to the real. As long as we apprehend the substantial changes of transforming the world into intellectual kingdom, we must not look down on the tradition-base of our moral life as man. Reason cannot contend itself with a mere approximation. MacIntyre used a much broader approach in attacking liberal neutrality and individualism. He applied new reasoning method to philosophical doctrine hitherto taken for

granted by re-analyzing its common philosophical concepts. MacIntyre cynicism and disillusionment with modern morality surprised and intrigued the philosophical world. His writing is not arid or abstract but he used philosophical history to illustrate his points. He denied the idea of separating philosophical history from philosophy. In other words, he wants us to understand the various schools of thought, the context in which they were formulated and written.

A perfect philosophy should reflect the society. Moral philosophy is unique, in that as well as being perspective, it is descriptive. To be able to formulate a perfect moral system, we must not only discover the basis for morality, but we must also observe that morality is in practice. Thus MacIntyre's argument is on the problem with modern morality. People are not only ignoring and rejecting morality and its norms but morality is in great jeopardy, because its basis has been lost. For MacIntyre, the actual world which we inhabit is in the state of grave moral disorder. The example he cited is the huge moral disagreement in our society today. MacIntyre blamed what he called "the Enlightenment project" for morality collapse.

It is on this note that MacIntyre came up with his Tradition-based-morality as a solution to the chaotic problem. He reverted to an Aristotelian paradigm, with its essential commitment to teleology. He therefore formulated a new morality based on the commitment.

## 6. Conclusion

Having seen the philosophical stance of MacIntyre on morality viz a viz the modern day moral questions, we can see to ourselves that morality is in the state of disorder. The truth of course, does not come to us from the authority of the past rather dialogue and knowledge on the insights that constitute our intellectual heritage which will help us to understand our common concerns and goals. MacIntyre's account of the downfall of morality is indeed fascinating. His reasoning is very clear-cut and simple. The idea that each individual as soon as he or she becomes old is old enough and intelligent enough to discard his or her parent's morality and adopts for himself or herself a new one should not be encouraged. Thus, MacIntyre's critique on liberal approach to morality is justified since man is born into a community, a town, a society, in fact into a tradition that is morally based. Hence, the task of MacIntyre was to replace the inadequate liberal philosophies that emerged from the enlightenment with something that predates it by centuries. MacIntyre convincingly shows the flaws in the enlightenment project and came up with a replacement that is even more satisfactory.

There is need then for cultural transformation and the need to re-establish the essential connection between morality and freedom. As we build for greater moral probity, we are called for a general mobilization of consciences and a united ethical effort to activate a great campaign in support of good moral conducts. Abortion, euthanasia, and same sex marriage should be abhorred. We are encouraged then, to cultivate the virtue of having adequate knowledge of the tradition of which we belong.

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