The believer and macintyre's emotivist culture

Title: The Believer and MacIntyre's Emotivist CultureAuthor: Katherine PerryDate Written: Feb. 22, 2006Words: 2, 085In his book After Virtue, Alasdair MacIntyre asserts that members of contemporary society live in a world devoid of definitively objective moral foundation, a world he calls an " emotivist culture." This essay will first define which specific characteristics MacIntyre believes are entailed in such a culture. Second, it will explain and elucidate the author's argument for why the present state of the world reflects this emotivist culture. Last, it will present an argument refuting MacIntyre's vision because his roster of emotivist social characters lacks a key non-emotivist player—the believer, or an individual who grounds his or her belief in a divine moral code. Before delving into an explanation of MacIntyre's emotivist culture, it is both important and necessary to define emotivism as a moral philosophy. A theory of emotively-based moral judgments, emotivism purports that the assessment of values can be understood only in terms of emotive meaning, or on the basis of personal and individual realities. MacIntyre describes the theory as follows: " Emotivism is the doctrine that all evaluative judgments and more specifically more judgments are nothing but expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling, insofar as they are moral or evaluative in character." (MacIntyre 10) In his argument, MacIntyre says emotivism fails as a theory of meaning but succeeds as a theory of use. To clarify, the statement " Capital punishment is wrong" as a theory of meaning might translate as " Capital punishment – boo." As a theory of use, this same statement would have persuasive or rhetorical effects so as to garner support for the cause to perhaps end capital punishment. By combining MacIntyre's account of emotivism with the concept of culture, or a particular society at a particular

time and place, it is now possible to explain which features comprise today's emotivist culture. The author paints a somewhat pessimistic portrayal of the modern world — one that would certainly both shock and disturb the average human being. In MacIntyre's drearily-depicted emotivist culture, value judgments (or assessments of the universal goodness or badness of certain actions) are nothing but expressions of preference, attitude or feeling. Morality has no universal, overarching or objective grounds. Instead, moral choices are intrinsically arbitrary and are therefore at the mercy of the individual mind. Like having a favorite color, morality deals with taste and is merely a matter of opinion. To bolster his description of today's culture as one based heavily on emotivist theory, MacIntyre emphasizes its distinctiveness from past societies. He alludes to past thinkers Nietzsche and Sartre to contrast the " very different moral philosophies in Germany and France" with contemporary emotivist cultures. In the past, emotivist theories proposed by such thinkers were unconventional and eccentric, but MacIntyre says such theories dominate present-day culture. He dwells on how pervasive such ideals have become in today's society and explains how they form a consensus set of beliefs based on emotivism. MacIntyre emphasizes the centrality of emotivist thought to contemporary culture in the following passage: For one way of framing my contention that morality is not what it once was is just to say that to a large degree people not think, talk and act as if emotivism were true, no matter what their avowed theoretical standpoint may be. Emotivism has become embodied in our culture (22). In his description and differentiation of emotivist culture from past societies, MacIntyre makes two bold assertions. First, he claims morality is not what it used to be prior to the moral apocalypse. Second, and more importantly, he

says what once was morality is gone. MacIntyre calls this " a grave cultural loss," and arrives at such a jarring and novel claim—that is, that society today is in fact an emotivist culture—by constructing a proof of the reasoning behind his belief. The argument is valid, as its conclusion follows logically from its preceding premises. MacIntyre's argument for his emotivist culture theory is unpacked and summarized below: Premise 1: Emotivism, by virtue of being a moral philosophy, implies a sociology, or study of social interactions among individuals. Premise 2: Sociology implies the presence of certain characters which embody the specific and telling social roles of a given society: the characters of today's culture are intrinsically emotivist. Conclusion: The social roles of a society constitute its culture; social roles founded in emotivist rationale reveal the presence of an emotivist culture. Taking each statement separately, the explanation of MacIntyre's argument begins with the premise that all moral philosophies require a sociology, or study of social interactions. Because emotivism is categorically considered a moral philosophy, the author asserts that it, too, presupposes a sociology. For every moral philosophy offers explicitly or implicitly at least a partial conceptual analysis of the relationship of an agent to his or her reasons, motives, intentions and actions, and in so doing generally presupposes some claim that these concepts are embodied or at least can be in the real social world (23). The second premise has two parts: a broad statement and a specific application of this statement to contemporary society. MacIntyre says sociology implies the presence of certain characters which embody particular social roles that indicate the nature of a society. MacIntyre says characters are " masks worn by moral philosophers" which " embody moral beliefs, doctrines and theories" (28). Characters also encompass both

sociological expectations and psychological wills of the individuals, and thus " morally legitimate a mode of social existence" (29). Regarding today's social context, MacIntyre says three characters in particular embody the essence of culture: the aesthete, the manager and the therapist. All are rooted in emotivism, MacIntyre says, because each represents the " obliteration of the distinction between manipulative and non-manipulative social relations" (23). MacIntyre describes the aesthete as an individual who exists and flourishes in " environments in which the problem of enjoyment arises in the context of leisure" (25). For the aesthete, the social world is a mere arena for the pursuit and ultimate satisfaction of their own desires — a goal he or she will strive to attain even at the personal cost of others. MacIntyre's second character, the manager, is the human embodiment of bureaucratic rationality, or the " rationality of matching means to ends economically and efficiently" (25). For the manager, the efficiency (not moral purpose) of a task is valued. The therapist completes MacIntyre's trio of contemporary social characters, and describes a value-free and judgment-free individual concerned only with effectiveness and technique in " transforming maladjusted individuals to well-adjusted ones" (29). Just as a manager represents an obliteration of the distinction between manipulative and non-manipulative social relations, the therapist also represents this ambiguity " in the sphere of personal life" (29). Similar to the second premise, the argument's conclusion is also comprised of broad and specific components. MacIntyre argues that the social roles of a given society — as embodied in its prime characters — define its culture, or way of life. Furthermore, social roles founded in emotivist rationale necessarily reflect an emotivist culture and " provide a culture with its moral definitions" (31).

While in theory MacIntyre's claim about contemporary culture seems plausible, closer observation into the practices of members of modern-day society indicate that something is amiss with the argument, primarily regarding his list of main characters. The list is incomplete. MacIntyre's three characters are appropriate because they do correctly reflect the values and virtues of contemporary culture; however, to the aesthete, the manager and the therapist a fourth character must be added: the believer. The refutation of MacIntyre's argument can be unpacked as follows: Premise 1: If culture is emotivist by nature, its " stock characters" or social roles must embody and reflect these same emotivist values. Premise 2: Not all social roles embody and reflect emotivist values. Conclusion: Therefore, culture cannot be deemed as truly emotivist. In MacIntyre's second premise, he claims a certain sociology implies the presence of certain characters which embody the specific and telling social roles of a given society, and that furthermore, the characters of today's culture are intrinsically emotivist. MacIntyre defines a character as " a very special type of social role which places a certain kind of moral constraint on the personality of those who inhabit them in a way in which many other social roles do not" (27). The believer's place among the roster of social characters who are " immediately recognizable to the audience" is crucial because of his or her pervasiveness and influence in contemporary society. For MacIntyre, characters are " moral representatives of the culture" and " express bodies of moral belief in their actions" (28). The believer certainly fits this bill. A 2001 study by The Graduate Center of the City University of New York found that in the United States 85 percent of people are affiliated with a particular religious sect, with nearly 80 percent of this total belonging to some form of Christian church. Similarly, a 2001

Gallup poll found that 41 percent of Americans attend Church regularly. Although a significant portion of this percentage do not actually attend services, the very fact that individuals are lying about participation in religions activities indicates just how much people strive to embody and personify the character of the believer. The believer is not only melded in the sociological strata of culture — it's embedded in its foundation and governmental aspects as well. The First Amendment of the United States Constitution guarantees freedom of religion. Though in theory, government is fundamentally divorced from religious matters, through the separation of church and state, often times in practice the two are fused. Evangelical Christians, for example, have tremendous influence in elections because their strong moral stances are generally consistent. In the 2001 presidential election, analysts purported that this group played a key role in George W. Bush's victory over John Kerry precisely because their strong believes caused them to vote in unison on moral issues such as abortion and gay marriage. A common thread in today's political world is the power of Christian voters, undoubtedly believers, who seek an objective moral code for the answer to such ethical issues and vote accordingly. In these instances, politicians often allude to God or call upon faith to garner votes. It is important to add that a distinction must be made between believer and priest, minister or churchgoer, as MacIntyre says societal characters cannot be defined in terms of institutions (29). " The requirements of character are imposed from the outside, from the way in which others regard and use characters to understand and to evaluate themselves," he says (29). Therefore, what makes the believer a key character in present-day society is not purely the statistical evidence. The believer is a key character because his or her

actions reflect his or her valuation of a divine and objective moral code. With the addition of the believer to MacIntyre's list, the last statement of his second premise (that the characters of today's culture are intrinsically emotivist) is untrue, as clearly the believer grounds their opinion in some type of divine moral code. Thus, the leap cannot be made from the emotivist nature of the characters to the emotivist nature of society because one of culture's most key players is essentially non-emotivist. Clearly, the distinction between manipulative and non-manipulative social relations has been eliminated in terms of the aesthete, the manager and the therapist. MacIntyre describes this elimination as a situation in which " each person treats the other primarily as a means to his or her ends" (23). To use someone as a means to an end, he says, is to be unwilling to influence another except by reasons which the other individual adjudicates to be " good." In such an emotivist culture, each character is responsible for defining his or her own morality and acting on his or her own set of beliefs by employing other individuals as " instruments" in their task (24). This cannot be the case for the believer; however, who adheres to an objectively ecclesiastical source of morality and looks to this – not themselves – for guidance in their day-to-day actions. MacIntyre's argument for an emotivist culture is compelling; however, it is not whole without the addition of the believer. The failure of MacIntyre's second premise, that characters of contemporary society are essentially emotivist, falls apart when this character is added to the cast. MacIntyre's claim that society is emotivist because the majority of key social characters reflect such values cannot be made due to the influence and pervasiveness of the believer. In the end,

society cannot be correctly labeled as " emotivist" because there exists

evidence of non-emotivist tendencies, as embodied by the believer.