Concealment and Uncovering in Moral Philosophy and Moral Practice

Martin J. Packer
University of California, Berkeley, Calif., USA

Key Words. Conflict · Moral action · Moral development · Moral philosophy

Abstract. Parallels are drawn between MacIntyre's account, in After Virtue, of contemporary moral theory and practice, and the conduct of young adults in conflicts which developed over 'burning' — the breaking of an agreement to cooperate in a modified version of the Prisoner's Dilemma. These parallels suggest that we should be sensitive in our research on moral action and moral development to both the meaning and the use of moral utterances, and aware of the possibility of a systematic covering-up at work in the relationship between these two.

Moral philosophy — and, indeed, moral practice — has recently received a cogent and damning critique. The critique applies also to the psychological study of morality, for in our research we inevitably adopt one or another ethical position and use it, even if tacitly, as a framework within which to place what we observe and describe. In After Virtue, MacIntyre [1981] argues that moral talk and practice in our contemporary Western culture have declined to a state of disorder and fragmentation. Our moral debates contain and make reference to, he suggests, only fragments of coherent moral schemes from the past, removed from the contexts in which these schemes had significance. Contemporary moral disagreements are characterized by their conceptual incommensurability, the appeal to objective standards whose form and origin remain opaque, and an indignant self-righteousness. When people engage in moral disagreement the moral form of their speech is employed to express their personal opinions and interests. So MacIntyre argues that emotivism, intended as a general theory of the meaning of moral utterances, is actually an accurate theory of their current use.

To understand the current disorder, MacIntyre undertakes a narrative historical anal-
ysis of the decline, since philosophy, neither analytical nor phenomenological, cannot by itself discern it. The result is essentially a developmental account of moral philosophy, from Aristotle to Gewirth.

MacIntyre argues that the Enlightenment’s rejection of the Aristotelian teleological system of virtues left it with the impossible task of providing a ‘rational secular account of the nature and status of morality’ [p. 256]. Moral theorists can be placed in a historical sequence which is sensible in terms of this task. Hume tried to place the basis of morality in emotion, because it is the passions and not reason which move us to action. Kant rejected such a solution, and instead saw formal logical necessity as the underpinning of moral action. Kierkegaard regarded both the aesthetic (Humean) and the ethical (Kantian) ways of life as equally valid alternative options. We must actively choose one of them, he argued, in order to feel its authority, but there is no reason for the choice we make; the choice itself determines what is to count as a reason – aesthetic pleasure or ethical obligation. Nietzsche represents the culmination of this project in moral philosophy; noting the inadequacies of both the empiricist and rationalist attempts at systematic justification, he concludes that we should reject all systems of moral justification as being corrupt expressions of personal preference and the will to power.

In the case of each of these philosophical accounts, the content of the theory remained a conservative, unquestioned individualism, despite the disparate ways of attempting to justify it [p. 47]. The theorists also agreed that a rational justification would characterize some key feature of human nature and then lay out the rules universally accepted by a being with such a nature. However, one feature of the Enlightenment was the general adoption of a conception of human nature and a set of moral injunctions which were expressly designed to be discrepant with each other [p. 55]. As a consequence the task moral philosophy set itself is insoluble. In its attempts at a solution it left us, says MacIntyre, with a moral language which contains jumbled remnants of deontological (divine law) and teleological (human nature) moralities.

When I read MacIntyre’s book in a Mendocino coast town this summer, I was struck by certain similarities between his descriptions of the culture-wide characteristics of moral discourse, in its current state of ‘decline’, and phenomena I had become aware of while studying the conflicts of young adults involved in a modified version of the Prisoner’s Dilemma situation. The similarities threw fresh light on my work, and provided a modicum of empirical support for some of MacIntyre’s views.

In my examination of these conflicts [Packer, 1985] I describe the interchanges which were consequent upon the breaking of agreements to cooperate – ‘burning’ as the participants called it – that occurred repeatedly in sessions of the Prisoner’s Dilemma. What became apparent in the course of a careful interpretive account of these conflicts was that a distinction needed to be made between the concerns which motivated the young adults’ actions (including their speech, of course) and the issues they talked about. The interpersonal ‘movements’ which were apparent in conflictual interaction were frequently tangential or opposed to the apparent topics of disagreement. Centrally, in the second of the three phases that I came to distinguish in these conflicts, talk took the form of giving accounts of what had transpired – the
events of the ‘burning’ – as unquestioned ‘facts’ of the matter. These descriptions centered around what I termed a ‘pseudo-issue’ – usually the number of pennies won or lost as a result of the broken agreement.

At the same time a whole variety of things, the way people talked, the emotions of outrage and anger they evinced, their posture, etc., indicated that two concerns had arisen and were directing people's actions: trust and responsibility. The concern over trust was apparent in the emotional movement immediately after the burning. Those burned, the team who had fewer points, saw the burners, the winning team, as having behaved in a manner which was counter to the taken-for-granted practices constitutive of friendship. This fracture led to emotions of surprise and indignation, and withdrawal on the part of the burned. There was a marked reduction in the intimacy between the teams. Responsibility also became a concern; the victims of the burning presented themselves, in the way they talked and acted, as superior to their friends, treating them as stupid, contemptible, or otherwise having low status as responsible individuals.

These concerns, and the interpersonal movements motivated by them, were apparent as one watched the video-recorded conflicts, or read the transcripts of them, but they formed no part of the explicit talk between the participants themselves, at least initially. Instead, talk focussed on the pseudo-issue of how many points were won and lost. So the concerns were covered up, as were the interests and the goals the two teams had by virtue of becoming ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ early in the session. Yet, eventually deliberation about what had occurred progressed to a point where these concerns and interests became raised as explicit issues. The moral conflicts remained incommensurable until the concerns and interests which underlay them were uncovered. This uncovering was not, however, a rational weighing of principled claims, but a progressive articulating of aspects of the events of the burning.

There are four ways in which MacIntyre's description of our culture's moral language parallels my account of the practices of a few dozen individuals. First, both accounts find it necessary to make a distinction between what is said and the way it is said. MacIntyre talks of the use of expressions (their purpose or function) as distinct from, and at odds with, their meaning (including their sense and reference); I identified movements and concerns apparent at the level of unreflective practical activity, and contrasted this with what I somewhat cruelly called the ‘mythology’ of persuasive discourse, when articulation or practical deliberation begins.

Second, MacIntyre and I find similar characteristics in the talk of moral disagreement. MacIntyre describes the absence of resolution, the appeal to objective criteria of right and wrong, and an indignant self-rightheadiness. I also identified the incommensurability of the points of view expressed, together with their certitude and egocenteredness. After the initial emotionally grounded interpersonal actions had taken place, the young adults gave accounts of what had occurred in the form of doubt-free descriptions of the ‘facts’, taking it for granted that others shared their understanding of events, and unaware of the possibility that other views might exist.

Third, there are certain characteristics pertaining to the use of utterances in moral conflict. I saw action initially taking the form of unreflective responses to the burning,
which was itself understood in the context of the positions the students were in as 'winners' and 'losers' in the game. *MacIntyre* sees such conflicts as structured by interests which are grounded in a human community, and by what people feel they deserve for their contributions to the common tasks of that community [p. 251]. His position appears to be that moral disagreements are expressions of people's competing interests, and that our society has no rational way of deciding between such claims (between, for example, those based on legitimate entitlement and those based on need) [p. 246].

Fourth, both *MacIntyre* and I emphasize the central role in moral conflict of a certain kind of covering up in the relationship between practice and content. The superficial issue of points won and lost at first hides the underlying moral concerns; the conflict is talked about as factual rather than valuative: the number of points lost is an objective issue, while talk of trust and responsibility is blatantly valuative. The distortion is not a deliberate attempt to mislead; the participants are genuinely unaware of the way their position and interests structure their understanding of events.

There are also differences between the two accounts, of course. First, I attributed the covering-up to the role of emotion, rather than to a historical decline in our culture's moral system. The participants were, I suggested, aware of the *object* of their emotions of outrage and anger, but not of the *cause* of these emotions: namely, their status in the game. The experience of an emotion, I argued, characteristically involves this confusion of object and cause: the object is experienced as also being the cause, and a covering-up occurs. Nor is the covering-up one of simple rationalization, as *MacIntyre* appears at times to be saying. Utterances which claim objectivity are not attempts, conscious or otherwise, to hide valuative interests; rather, our interests constitute what is objective for us, and deeply held values necessarily recede behind the 'facts' and 'objective principles' that they bring into existence. But this constituting relationship makes uncovering a possibility, too.

A second difference is that there is a fifth component to my own account which is absent in *MacIntyre’s*. I saw participants often engaged in a progressive uncovering of their own values and interests, and of the role these played in the disagreement. *MacIntyre* and I share the view that a degree of self-deception occurs in our everyday moral interactions – that we are, at least initially, largely unaware of the concerns and interests which structure our sense of what is and what is not moral, right, and appropriate in a given situation. What the interpretive description of actual conflicts suggests, tantalizingly, is that when individuals call each other to account for their actions, the values and concerns which tacitly structure the issues and ‘facts’ can eventually be uncovered by the participants themselves. *MacIntyre* sees this uncovering as largely a philosopher’s, or a philosopher-historian’s, task. If I am correct in my interpretations, it is a task which can also be carried out on the practical level, in mundane moral conflicts.

If this is so, then we are perhaps not in quite so hopeless a position as *MacIntyre* sketches at the end of his book: ‘the new dark ages which are already upon us... the barbarians... have already been governing us for quite some time’ [p. 263]. There is distortion in our moral dealings, and moral philosophy is perhaps unable to rectify it, but it is a distortion which we are at least on occasion able
to come to recognize by ourselves, without the aid of expert philosophical assistance. Much of our discourse, particularly that of the bureaucrats and politicians who are what MacIntyre calls the 'Characters' of our culture, may take the form of partisan positions disguised as value-free, factual presentations. But we may not be, as MacIntyre posits, entirely oblivious to this state of affairs. We can uncover it, in ourselves and others, even if perhaps only in a piecemeal and effortful fashion.

References


Martin J. Packer,
Institute of Human Development,
Tolman Hall,
University of California at Berkeley,
Berkeley, CA 94720 (USA)