

**AN ANALYTICAL EVALUATION OF MACINTYRE'S  
CRITIQUE OF THE MODERN CONCEPTION OF  
THE ENLIGHTENMENT PROJECT**

by

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submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

**MASTER OF ARTS**

in the subject of

**PHILOSOPHY**

at the

**UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA**

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**MARCH 2006**



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## **Declaration**

I declare that:

AN ANALYTICAL EVALUATION OF MACINTYRE'S CRITIQUE OF  
THE MODERN CONCEPTION OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT  
PROJECT

is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been  
indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

Signature:.....

Date: 16 March 2006

V F Kuczynski



## **Preface**

There are always important individuals behind the scene of any undertaking and in this regard I want to convey my sincere appreciation to:

My supervisor, Dr Michael Cloete, I express my profound gratitude for your kindness and insightful comments and encouragement throughout the writing of my thesis. It has been a worthwhile journey where I have grown and been made aware, by you, of different and wonderful possibilities.

I also wish to acknowledge the University of South Africa (UNISA) and in particular the Department of Philosophy, a learning institution that has, throughout my years of study always provided a background that has been conducive to learning.

Thank you Irene Samson, my friend, who always encouraged me to study. My dearest parents, Jack and Goldie, thank you for inspiring me with values. To my beloved children, David and Jacqueline, your love and support have sustained me. I am truly blessed to have you both in my life.



## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis:

### AN ANALYTICAL EVALUATION OF MACINTYRE'S CRITIQUE OF THE MODERN CONCEPTION OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT PROJECT

Modernity has generally been interpreted as a radical expression of human progress in the light of the advances of modern science and technology. According to Alasdair MacIntyre, however, modernity is a project "doomed to failure". Given the progressive-linearity of the modern model of rationality, the past has, in principle, been ruled out as a source of moral-political wisdom and guidance. From the perspective of modernity, the present (as the progressive moment of the future) has therefore nothing to learn from past traditions. MacIntyre contends that the moral confusion within modernity comes from its loss of *telos*, mediated in terms of the past. Modernity therefore harbours a paradox based on its inability to provide a philosophical justification for establishing the possibility of human solidarity in the present, while simultaneously affirming its faith in the future. In this regard, MacIntyre's work is an important contribution to the philosophical debate on modernity.

**Key Terms:** Enlightenment; modernity; emotivism; morality; essential nature; science; reason; liberalism; communitarianism; discourse.



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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction: An overview of MacIntyre's views and objectives**

#### **1.1 Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to focus on the question of modernity, with particular reference to the ethical challenges posed by an epoch whose self-definition is derived primarily from its fundamental commitment to “progress” as the ultimate expression of reason. This work is a response to the many ethical problems and diverse points of view that have emerged as a result of the numerous changes brought about by the modern transformation of society. From the perspective of modernity, the present is interpreted as a progressive moment whose realization will occur in a future that is, by definition, radically incommensurable with the past. The past, in turn, is usually interpreted as an unchanging (pre-rational) way of life, guided by mysticism, superstition and ignorance. This characterization of the past is based on modernity's association of reason with the advances of modern science and technology. The speed at which modern society has experienced transformation and development in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, along with its general acceptance of liberalism as the moral-political framework of human interaction, have been the major causes of the alienation suffered by the “ordinary” modern individual, whose sense of “self” has been dictated by a general obsession with self-aggrandizement, which has invariably taken the form of a never-ending competition and conflict with other individuals, on the one hand, as well as the form of domination of nature, on the other hand. This sense of self-aggrandizement has resulted in constant upheavals in the capitalist free market system, and alienation in the workplace, as well as the depletion of some of the natural resources so vital to the survival of the human species on earth. From the perspective of modernity, the sense of self (of being human) is synonymous with the autonomous individual, motivated generally by a rationality of self-interest, the primary basis of moral decision-making.



The work of Alasdair MacIntyre represents a very important contribution, as well as serious challenge, to the contemporary debate on the philosophical significance and nature of the question of modernity. His views on the question of modernity as expressed in his major work, *After Virtue*, 1985, will provide the primary focus of my thesis; his analyses of various ethical theories, primarily emotivism and related issues, will be examined as models to demonstrate the moral dilemmas confronting modernity.

In my opinion, *After Virtue* is a significant work in view of the fact that it attempts to address the question of modernity from an ethical perspective. For MacIntyre, the question of “progress” must therefore not be addressed solely in terms of scientific-technical rationality, but also in terms of human solidarity – beyond the imperatives of economic and moral self-interest. Modernity must therefore face the challenge of defining the “good life” in a manner reminiscent of the discipline emanating from traditional “religious life”, fully mindful of the fact that “Reason” rather than “God” represents the highest authority. How will the creatures of modernity meet this challenge? It is this question that has motivated me to explore the “project of Enlightenment”. I am particularly concerned with investigating the implications of modernity’s self-imposed undertaking to break off all ties with the past as a legitimate source of justification for its central values and general moral orientation.

Individuals frequently seem to have forgotten or, at worst, discarded what is basically known to be right or wrong; a system of values appears to be absent. Within the context of modernity, ethical issues that previously were considered to be unproblematic, and generally acceptable, are in principle open to dispute, thus emphasizing the need for the development of an authoritative foundation of moral justification capable of convincing individuals of radically different views that consensus born of mutual respect provides the only “rational” way of dealing with moral questions that lack the foundation of certainty that we normally



associate with the world of science. In the absence of such certainty, however, modernity must learn to live with conflict and disagreement in a morally acceptable way, if it is not to succumb to what has become the modern malaise of “anything goes, as long as it works for you”, the primary cause of uncertainty.

As far as MacIntyre is concerned, modernity’s moral disintegration stems from its dogmatic dismissal of the past as a source of moral instruction and enlightenment. For him, the critical evaluation and acknowledgement of historical traditions are crucial to developing a meaningful and more humane sense of self. It also provides a normative context for dealing with moral conflict, thus eliminating the destructive impact of an arbitrary form of reasoning on the moral life of a community, in which family life may still be viewed as a primary source of human solidarity. In his endeavour to make sense of the modern process of change, MacIntyre reminds us that we need to be conscious of the fact that we are indebted to past generations (our ancestors) and that historical factors do influence human relationships because people are principally social animals and, therefore, tradition and political activities are part of a person’s social development.

MacIntyre’s main contention in *After Virtue* is that the modern person has lost the capacity for leading a meaningful life. He claims that modernity’s entire conceptual scheme is fragmented and, in line with this reasoning, he states that ‘we have lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, of morality.’ (MacIntyre 1985: 2) In an attempt to counteract this situation, he maintains that it is of vital importance that society reinstates disciplined moral actions where individuals can once again achieve true freedom and thereby gain fulfilment in living more meaningful lives. He repeatedly tells us that it is vital to take into consideration concrete settings in order to arrive at an accurate judgement about any incident.



According to MacIntyre, another persistent problem in connection with modernity is that the individual has become unmindful of his or her *telos* (essential “nature” to be realized as an individual project pursued in concert with others). He claims that rehabilitating the concept of *telos* could possibly encourage the individual to reaffirm his or her true self in the knowledge that an ethical life is of universal significance. He also adds that no living creature can divorce himself or herself entirely from his or her unique circumstances, since each person in some manner or another is normally dependent on other beings in the pursuit of self-knowledge. The intricacies of how change and co-existence with others occur are part of the tapestry of history. MacIntyre’s examination of a broad range of subjects reinforces his philosophical views that humans are touched by a diversity of events, especially as they readjust to changing circumstances. He declares that, in modernity’s case, these endless changes and unpredictable moral dilemmas have contributed extensively towards the downward trend of ethical beliefs and hence moral behaviour.

In order to gain a clearer understanding of MacIntyre’s statement concerning the serious predicaments of ethics, it is important to evaluate the ethical theories that have enjoyed general acceptance within the current conceptual framework of modernity, namely, the theories of emotivism and utilitarianism. In this regard one may ask: what is the rationale behind specific actions, for example, why are some actions thought to be good in certain circumstances whereas in other similar situations viewed as bad? It is apparent that this state of affairs is frequently caused by the fact that other cultural communities or individuals have established their own rules or ideas about solving various problems, and that a different or unfamiliar response invariably leads to conflicting assessments or merely unacceptable resolutions. These issues in turn raise the need for an inquiry into the nature of human rights with a view to inquiring into the possibility of establishing their “universal” nature in the face of the subjectivistic nature of the ethics of modernity.



For MacIntyre, a major source of modernity's moral crisis is indeed the theory of emotivism, which encourages arbitrary solutions that undoubtedly lead to relativism and to the individual's attitude of entitlement, on the one hand. The theory of utilitarianism, on the other hand, is equally unacceptable insofar as it encourages a technical approach to questions of morality: if a particular course of action can produce the desired results, then it is "right", if not, then it is "wrong". From this perspective, the question of the "good life" as a function of a particular's community's moral foundations is reduced to the individual's "right" to be protected against interference from the community (its traditions), the state, and the "other".

The question of modernity will be examined against the background of MacIntyre's central claim that the project of Enlightenment has failed, that indeed it was doomed to fail right from the start. In reaction against the destructive individualism of the modern epoch, MacIntyre seeks to address modernity from the perspective of its past history (histories) in order to emphasize the point that the individual is more than a consumer or an insignificant statistic in the anonymous regime of modern technology, bureaucracy and capitalism. Against this view, MacIntyre argues that the narrative of each person's life is the product of what has occurred before and this historical-cultural legacy, in turn, defines who the person was, is and what he or she may become. The individual, conceptualised as a member of a community, draws his or her inspiration for moral excellence from many diverse historical figures throughout the centuries. Indeed, the indebtedness of society to its legacy is referred to by Robert Pippin in his book, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem: On the Dissatisfactions of European High Culture*. He mentions that John Salisbury writes in his *Metalogicon* (1159) as follows:

We frequently know more, not because we have moved ahead by our own natural ability, but because we are supported by the mental strength of others, and possess riches that we have



inherited from our forefathers. ... we see more and farther than our predecessors, not because we have keener vision or greater height, but because we are lifted up and borne aloft on their gigantic stature. (Pippin 1991: 18)

Throughout his writings, MacIntyre mentions that the fundamental factors that have led to the failure of the Enlightenment Project include, firstly, the fact that modern society has denied its legacy, secondly, promotion of an emotivist culture with its various disadvantageous ramifications, namely, relative and random assumptions as well as the secularization of society, thirdly, the autonomous individual's dissociation from the community and tradition has left modernity in a state of moral crisis with no frame of reference and, finally, the theory of liberalism's intense focus on rational self-interest has set in motion circumstances that have created discord and uncertainty in judging precisely what is really right or wrong conduct. Here, MacIntyre argues that to divorce a citizen completely from a basic moral ethos can never be conducive to living a "good life".

The central focus of this thesis is modernity, the so-called period of radical Enlightenment. Factors that will be investigated are the sociological (and historical) as well as the philosophical context for understanding and evaluating the period in question. While MacIntyre acknowledges that tremendous advances have been made in all areas of knowledge during the Enlightenment period, he is especially critical of the fact that the scientific-technical process of reasoning (instrumental rationality) has been regarded as the sole means of acquiring knowledge. In view of the transformation of modern society into a secularized social structure, modernity has produced a culture that no longer feels the need to be dominated by the authority of the Church, traditional customs and beliefs. This rejection of the legitimacy of the authority of history (as a source of the collective memory and as a function of human solidarity) has resulted in the development of a liberal political tradition whose future "progress"



is defended to justify modernity's collective amnesia and indifference to the moral question of social and historical justice. The modern focus on individual autonomy within the context of moral-political liberalism constitutes a constant distortion and threat to human autonomy in a meaningful sense. In MacIntyre's view, liberalism has simply promoted modernity's moral degeneration. The traditional moral-orientated society has been replaced by a modern rule-regulated society, in which the question of the collective is simply no longer a priority.

For the purpose of demonstrating his position on ethics within the context of modernity, MacIntyre presents the reader with a very disturbing symbolic tale concerning the disintegration of moral values. He claims that with society's overemphasis on science and technical-strategic reasoning, as the primary tools to attain knowledge, human beings are struggling to come to terms with ethical principles. He is critical of modernity's methods of trying to make sense of all the chaos by its combination of aspects that are usually logically incompatible. This point is well stated in the following quote, 'What we possess, if this view is true, are the fragments of a conceptual scheme, parts which now lack those contexts from which their significance derived'. (MacIntyre 1985: 2) At this point, it should be taken into account that to determine what ethics is about it is not sufficient to offer an exact definition. In other words, it is essential first of all to ponder upon the nature of virtue (moral excellence), as the ancient Greeks once did under the guidance of the great ancient African-Egyptian moral and spiritual imperatives of cosmic-human order and harmony. More to the point, MacIntyre is of the view that the Enlightenment Project has failed because it cannot provide the kind of moral (teleological) guidance that one finds in Aristotelian ethics. In his attempt to address the problem of ethical thinking within the context of modernity, MacIntyre's position invariably vacillates between two poles of tension: on the one hand, he wants to place moral thinking on a rational foundation that goes beyond the individualism of the liberal tradition; on the other hand, he wants to defend the uniqueness of "the community" (the communitarian tradition) in order



to avoid the trap of false universalism. MacIntyre's thinking in this regard is obviously in sympathy with the communitarian approach. Linked to his notion of community-living is MacIntyre's preoccupation with tradition, as he is of the opinion that without a return to tradition, meaningful moral interaction is not possible. At the root of MacIntyre's position is the assumption that tradition brings about some form of unity; it offers a frame of reference in which moral thinking can be grounded. Furthermore, customary practices and communal lifestyles enable a person to have a sense of belonging, as well as have an opportunity to realize that he or she has a unique identity in view of his or her social roles and interaction with others. For MacIntyre, the historical and the traditional, informed by the collective processes of education and socialization, provide the unavoidable and inescapable starting-point of each individual's life, conceptualized as a tapestry of "reinventable" narratives emanating from the past.

In accordance with the foregoing observations and explanations, the subject matter of each chapter is presented hereunder.

I commence my discussion of MacIntyre's critique of modernity in Chapter Two by presenting the historical and philosophical aspects of the Enlightenment Project. In Section One of this chapter, I will focus on the privileged status of (philosophical) reason as the foundation of all knowledge claims, scientific-technical as well as moral-political knowledge claims. Inspired by a radical sense of self-consciousness of a "new" age, I will demonstrate how modern reason has become bogged down in a scientific (positivistic) definition of itself, thereby condemning the rational potential of modernity to the level of the technological developments of modern science. The impact of scientific methodology, with Newton as a key figure, will be considered from this perspective. In Section Two of this chapter, the most important representatives of modernity, Descartes and Kant, will be critically examined with specific reference to their respective



foundationalist epistemological models, aimed at achieving certainty and hence true knowledge.

The purpose of Chapter Three is to focus on MacIntyre's criticism of modernity. Herein, I highlight the reasons for MacIntyre's fundamental claim that modernity is a project that was doomed to fail. I also consider MacIntyre's views on modernity's moral degeneration, with particular reference to his critique of the ethical theory of emotivism as an appropriate theory for the normative framework of modernity. Together with the negative effect of an emotivistic culture on modern morality, utilitarianism will also be evaluated concerning its emphasis on the ideas of rights and usefulness.

In Chapter Four, I discuss MacIntyre's critique of liberalism. I will evaluate his argument that liberalism reduces questions about morality to the narrow sphere of the "self" and, as such, fails to provide an objective and intelligible or rational basis for assessing moral claims. In the light of the above assertions, MacIntyre suggests that a restructuring of Aristotelian principles for a good life is a probable solution to the moral crisis of modernity, since it can provide guidelines for reintroducing the idea of "unity" with specific reference to the inestimable value of tradition as the cultural repository of virtuous practices. At this juncture, I would like to mention that MacIntyre openly acknowledges his debt to Frederick Nietzsche, as one of the most important critics of modernity. It is well known that Nietzsche openly condemned modernity as nothing more than an aggressive "will-to-power", and that all morality is just a façade to mask the manipulative and destructive impulses of human behaviour. For Nietzsche, when morality loses its legitimacy (when "God is dead"), humankind loses its reason to be "good". Unlike Nietzsche, however, MacIntyre is of the opinion that the salvation of modern man lies in its potential to remember the past; there is no talk for MacIntyre of "learning to forget" and "new beginnings", as we find in Nietzsche.



Of special relevance, because of modernity's perspective and never-ending call for renewal, in Chapter Five, I propose to present an alternative method to resolve problematic issues to accommodate the modern mindset, namely, Habermas's dialogical approach. Communication, as a major method to arrive at a common understanding of not simply problematic issues but also about shared experiences, is examined. Within this context, Habermas structures a rational model of intersubjective discourse aimed at comprehending and interpreting our lifeworld; simultaneously never losing sight of the fact that the practical nature of conversation should be addressed. What is more, with reference to modernity's mode of thinking Habermas states that validity claims accompany communicative action, defined as a means of attaining understanding about various interpretations and arriving at consensus. It is as a result of an exchange of ideas that humans can connect with each other and establish whether a discussion is rational and that a logical process of reasoning has been followed. Finally, in this chapter Habermas looks at the status of modernity, in order to establish whether it is indeed a failed enterprise (as maintained by MacIntyre) or, in keeping with his (Habermas's) outlook, modernity is definitely an "unfinished project".

Against the background of the amazing scientific discoveries and new ideas, MacIntyre examines the decline of morality and factors that lead to this situation. The final chapter (Chapter Six) is, therefore, a brief concluding summary of the chapters of this thesis. Modernity is recognized as a period that severed all ties with its predecessors and which has directed its energies into an outpouring of new dreams. In order to remove the uncertainties created by the changing environment a new consciousness has emerged. Reason has become the guiding tenet to acquire all knowledge. The commencement and dominance of scientific discoveries are evident as proof of humankind's release from preconceptions and ignorance. Key figures in this liberating process are Descartes, Newton and Kant (their respective contributions are discussed in Chapter Two). The scientific community has undertaken to solve the insecurities



of humankind by establishing a single methodology to attain all knowledge through reason and in the process has argued that the social sciences cannot be investigated in a similar manner. Instrumental rationality has made its mark often to the detriment of human dignity. This is an extremely disturbing problem for MacIntyre. According to MacIntyre, the fundamental transformations of perception in all areas of social structures and belief systems lead to the collapse of morality. And, it is within this setting that MacIntyre voices his criticism of modernity (in Chapter Three). For him, further aspects that have caused the downfall of the Enlightenment Project are: first and foremost, an emotivistic culture created by the autonomous individual who is essentially interested in the “self” and materialistic gains; second, utilitarianism has based moral conduct on what is most useful; third, disregard of traditional practices eventually has promoted moral turmoil and disregard of the human being’s *telos*. In view of these factors and MacIntyre’s conviction that historical facets are interwoven into society’s consciousness, he suggests a reinvestment in Aristotelian ethics and the ideals of the *polis* (in Chapter Four). However, taking the outlook of the modern individual into consideration, I propose to offer a different approach to MacIntyre’s way of thinking, namely, Habermas’s dialogical approach (in Chapter Five). Habermas’s theory of communication offers a compelling alternative to MacIntyre’s method to resolve modernity’s problematic concerns. Both Habermas and Gadamer emphasize the relevance of understanding to interpret the lifeworld of the agent. Aside from this fact, there remain unanswered questions, for example, whether reason is the sole factor upon which to ground morality. However, despite the various arguments and counter-arguments, it will also become apparent that there is a necessity for a system of values in modernity, and open debate certainly appears to be a positive means to attain this end.

## **1.2 Conclusion**

If one considers former societies, that is, more “traditional” societies, modernity seems to have moved off in another direction. For instance, the manner in which



authority was accepted in the Middle Age differs significantly from the modern approach to authority. Previously, what was decreed by the church or monarchy was looked upon as being law; nothing could be questioned. However, now everything is questioned and in many respects rightly so, since even religion has also brought about questionable conditions, as a result of dogmatic belief systems and superstitious notions that have, in turn, resulted in untold suffering and death to millions of people. Taking into consideration the situation of morality, however, MacIntyre argues that it is essential to offer “good” reasons as the legitimating basis of moral conduct. It is of fundamental importance to recognize that moral actions should be reinstated in a manner that is enriching to humankind, not in terms of material possessions for the (individual) consumer operating within an economic system of capitalism, but for the benefit of the community as a whole. In the chapters that follow, I intend to demonstrate my fundamental claim, namely, that whilst I appreciate the enormous significance of MacIntyre’s critique of modernity, I do not agree with him that modernity is necessarily doomed to failure.



## **Chapter Two**

### **Modernity: A new consciousness of time**

#### **Section One**

##### **2.1 Introduction**

In this chapter I propose to examine factors that relate to the historical and philosophical development of modernity. This chapter will consist of two sections. In the first section, special emphasis will be given to the development of a new historical consciousness of time which arose in the wake of the impact of the Scientific Revolution, the cornerstone of modernity and thus the key to the modern conception of reason and rationality. In the second section, I will discuss modernity in the light of arguably two of its most important representatives, namely, René Descartes and Immanuel Kant. My discussion of these two sections will provide the context for my basic position, namely, that modernity, when emphatically associated with the scientific model of rationality, leads one to doubt the possibility of understanding morality in rational terms, thus contributing to the dominance of a rather one-dimensional (scientific-technical) conception of rationality, which undermines the possibility of providing a rational basis for approaching ethical questions within the conceptual framework of modernity.

The era of modernity, as understood today, commenced in the seventeenth century. At the outset it must be stated that by definition the word “modern” implies “new”, and in keeping with this notion, modernity does not uphold or advocate anything that belongs to the past, more specifically to the traditional social order of pre-modern ages. With the advent of the advances made by modern science and technology, the values of traditional society simply became irrelevant. This age should, therefore, be seen as a new beginning and as an emancipation from a metaphysically-inspired otherworldly orientation to a more secularized universe which could now be understood and exploited in scientific



terms to the advantage of modern “Enlightened man”. The modern subject must therefore adapt to the secularization of a cultural ethos in which science was given the authority to expose “the sacred” as the product of human immaturity.

It is important to point out that the authority of science is based on the assumption that science can assure the modern subject of a rational epistemological foundation of certainty in terms of which to understand the objective “external” reality “out there”, on the one hand, and the “inner” subjective reality of moral thinking, on the other hand. A model of reason, dominated by a scientific model of reasoning could therefore dismiss the achievements of other “non-modern” cultures as the product of irrationality, myth and superstition. The position of the defender of a modernity, defined as the vehicle of scientific thinking, is therefore that modern man must sever all ties with history and tradition as a precondition of universal enlightenment and progress.

### **2.1.1 The secularization of time**

Basically, the most fundamental event that sets apart the ancient world from the modern world is the remarkable momentum at which the discipline of science has progressed and has influenced all aspects of knowledge about the natural world. Those thinkers anxious to find answers to the riddle of the universe could now avail themselves of the resources of the Age of Science. From this perspective, as illustrated in the works of Francis Bacon, for example, the modern inductive method of experimental reasoning represented the paradigmatic approach to knowledge and truth. Bacon’s statement that an empirical approach was significant “to balance purely rational considerations” confirms this standpoint. (Caws 1967: 340)

As stated above, modernity is a reaction against the authority of the Church and thus seeks to replace the authority of the latter with the authority of science as the only legitimate basis for the investigation of knowledge and truth. The modern epoch had arrived, that is, a new consciousness of time had emerged



that emphasized predominantly the conception of scientific reason as a foundation for the realization of all knowledge.

The authority of science is definitely very different from the authority of the Church because scientific methods originate primarily from intellectual understanding based on discoveries and observation within nature, where truth and knowledge can either be confirmed or disconfirmed simply by “looking at the facts”. The authority of the Church, by contrast, relies on the dogmatic assertion and revelation of divine truth, which serves as a basis for legislating on a hierarchical system of power that demands (blind) faith in the leaders of the Church. This authority of the Church cannot therefore be accommodated within the worldview of modernity because the modern subject can only acknowledge reason as the legitimate authority of truth, and when reason is restricted to a scientific conceptual framework, the question of morality does indeed pose an enormous challenge to the defenders of modern reason.

Owing to the emancipation from authority and customary belief systems, prior constraints diminished. As the Church’s restrictions diminished, morality was relegated to a lesser position that frequently resulted in disturbing dilemmas and confusion, given the lack of an authoritative moral compass within the ethos of modernity. Besides, with the elevation of subjectivity as the only legitimate conceptual framework of morality, “the ethical” became a matter of personal preference as objective criteria of reasoning became the exclusive prerogative of the scientific mode of reasoning.

An extremely important point that should be mentioned in the evolutionary progress of science is the radical repositioning of man’s place in the universe. The difference between the concept of a human being’s place in the world during the ancient epoch and Newton’s time was that, formerly the earth was considered the central point of the universe, and so every purpose was linked to humankind and his or her relationship with the world. From this perspective, a



scientific account of man's status in the universe was simply inconceivable. This perception of man and the earth as the privileged centre of life was, however, seriously challenged by modern science with huge implications for humankind's self-understanding within the context of modernity. The metaphysically based argument for a teleological function of humans, a view popularized by Aristotle, simply had no room in modern man's scientifically and biologically ordered universe.

There were outstanding achievements in the area of mathematics that facilitated scientific research as well, such as, the discovery of calculus that was attributed independently to both Newton and Leibniz. Besides this, an integral element of the formulation of scientific procedures was the added utilization of a logical system that included the appropriate management of language as a tool to promote exploration and analysis. While former techniques were restructured and improved, newer ones were created for the purpose of gaining more efficient and better results. This epoch was also remarkable for perfecting and developing essential instruments, for example, the microscope, telescope, thermometer. The result of these inventions facilitated scientific observation and experimentation as greater precision and accuracy made it possible to extend the frontiers of knowledge. It is relevant to keep in mind that while the goal of theoretical science was an attempt to understand the cosmos, however, it was due to the utilization of science in its practical realm that the greatest success was seen. Technological inventions had come into their own.

## **2.2 The Scientific Revolution: The impact of Sir Isaac Newton**

Significant thinkers who advanced the progress and achievements of science were Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, and Descartes (accredited with being the father of modernity). However, it is Newton, who is the primary exponent of modern scientific thinking as his work represents the ground-breaking transformations that occurred during modernity seeing that he revolutionized thinking on all levels, that is, not merely by his reformulation of former theories,



but by his own remarkable scientific innovations as shown in his various theories: the law of universal gravitation, rejection of the notion of absolute space and time, the contributions of kinetic energy to mechanics including mathematical advances. Science thus became the legitimate discipline of truth and knowledge as its methods made progress towards eliminating uncertainty, and “objectivity” became the ‘exclusive province of scientific or instrumental conceptions of reason’. (John W. Tate 1997: 297) The following quote substantiates this view:

Thus modernity is characterized by an increasing ‘disenchantment’  
– an undermining of the authoritative status of all value claims –  
because all ‘matters of evaluation’ are ‘scientifically demonstrable’.  
(John W. Tate 1997: 297)

Throughout previous historical eras philosophy and science were integrated and as a result science did not focus on a single fixed method. Modernity can be perceived as commencing from the time when philosophy and science became two distinct disciplines. Once science became an autonomous discipline revolutionary transformations occurred that had an effect not only on knowledge concerning the perception of reality and the material world, but also on the understanding of the human being, as an autonomous moral subject.

Science, augmented by the introduction of an unambiguous methodological structure, provided a point of departure for the attainment of knowledge as well as facilitated mankind’s realization for a better manner of survival through the awakening of a new consciousness based on a technical mode of reasoning. The objectives of this new consciousness were twofold: Firstly, underlying scientific procedures was the search and discovery of universal and necessary truths since every generalization presupposes, to a certain degree, a belief in unity and consistency. For this reason science is dependent upon principles and facts that are verifiable. Systematized empirical science embodies the most remarkable findings of human research. Secondly, to liberate society from



previously disabling factors, such as, dogmatic authority, superstitious beliefs and attitudes, and as a consequence gain control and understanding of the “objects of nature”. This period became an ethos for a mechanistic understanding of “man” and nature, thus making it extremely difficult to provide a rational account for the moral foundations of modernity.

### **2.2.1 Newton (1642-1727)**

It is definitely Newton who epitomizes the momentous transformations that occurred during modernity as he revolutionized not merely science, but society’s interrelations as he paved the way for much of the worldview at that time and subsequent years. His methods frequently demonstrate certain anticipatory traits of what could probably follow, ‘nature was believed to contain a harmony and order which lent support to man’s efforts to penetrate its secrets’. (Grimsley 1979: 11) The significance of Newton’s mechanistic approach was its tremendous repercussion on all areas of knowledge and therefore existence. His impact on the Enlightenment Project is well documented in Peter Gay’s work, *The Enlightenment An Interpretation: The Science of Freedom* and what has come to be known as the “Scientific Revolution”. (Gay 1970: 128) As an esteemed scientist Newton’s research became the model upon which modern science was to develop its future research for many years to come. Furthermore, Newton emphasized the fact that since the universe is a systematized structure it could be rationally understood. Here reason was also considered the sole factor in the acquisition of knowledge.

It is interesting to note that although he looked for universal qualities, he still made provision for any modifications that might be required in his experiments. Peter Caws explained that this proviso was set out in his fourth rule that, ‘notwithstanding any contrary hypotheses that may be imagined, till such time as other phenomena occur, by which they may either be made more accurate or liable to exceptions’, the original hypothesis could be defended on rational grounds. (Caws 1967: 341-342) In other words, he was also willing to



discontinue or make improvements or amendments to any former hypothesis that might be contradictory to or that was not all-embracing within a strict scientific model.

On the subject of science, it was claimed that the natural world could now be controlled seeing that events were now predictable. But, on a social level the outcome was often controversial. How does one account for the “subjective” basis of moral claims? Firstly, the replacement of the power of the Church by the power of science fostered conditions that in all probability were key issues in the collapse of moral practices. Secondly, it was maintained that since the scientific approach supported a logical method that included following rules and an exact structure, and in so doing generated conclusive and dependable results, the same procedure should be utilized to ground morality. Based on this assumption it was reasoned that ethical standards could also be derived in a similar manner. This stance subsequently resulted in the exchange of ethical principles for a rule-orientated society. For instance, rules that regulated conduct, rules on how to proceed if a certain outcome was to be arrived at, not only in relation to scientific knowledge but also in connection with human interactions. From this perspective, ethical thinking could be reduced to the value and utility of the consequences of human actions and decisions. Thus we read in the writings of consequentialist thinkers such as John Stuart Mill, for example, that the ‘rightness or wrongness of an action depends solely on the value of its consequences’. (Warnock, 1962: 257) The consequentialist approach to morality implies that rationality in the context of modernity is ultimately reducible to a narrow range of possible consequences, which are at best predictable. This mode of thinking also implies that people can be manipulated once we understand where they fit into the “big machine” which is the universe. With the reduction of humans to the level of an instrumentalized mode of reasoning, humankind and nature now become the objects of control and manipulation in the pursuit of knowledge.



With reference to Newton's ideas on the subject of God and man, it might be stated that he recognized the Christian God as the creator and ruler of the universe, but he also maintained that man's existence is determined by the laws of nature. There is therefore no place for religious dogma or tradition in Newton's thinking.

In Newton's time physics was the primary science but as the focus of science became wider, and additional branches of science gradually evolved, for instance, chemistry, biology and the social sciences, it was observed that various other requirements came to light and required atypical or specific approaches. Dissimilarities between the needs of Newton's era, in comparison with recent times, came about as a result of the scope and variety of information found in all areas of knowledge. Nowadays it is not simply sufficient to construct a single theory upon which to verify an experiment since the interplay of diverse conditions and practical activities also require attention. In addition it is recognized that probably different solutions might often be necessary or applicable to one particular problem. Regardless of the radical notions that unsurprisingly either changed or in certain instances distorted the interaction of people with each other, as well as their natural world, there cannot be any hesitation in the acknowledgement that the modern world is indebted to Newton, especially within the disciplines of science and mathematics, which in turn have had far-reaching consequences for technological advances; the ultimate expression of the "superiority" of modern reason.

In the next section, I will proceed to explore the philosophical implications of the alleged superiority of a model of rationality that is inextricably connected with the achievements of science and technology. How should the philosopher of modernity, as the defender of reason, respond to the "success" of science?



## Section Two

### 2.3 Modernity: As a philosophical category

The distinctive rationalistic trend of the modern philosophical tradition is basically a reaction to the overwhelming success of the Scientific Revolution. Philosophy could no longer remain fixated on the philosophical categories of thought of pre-modern societies. In this regard, Jürgen Habermas (1987: 7) correctly points out, 'Modernity can and will no longer borrow the criteria by which it takes its orientation from models supplied by another epoch; it *has to create its normativity out of itself*. Modernity sees itself cast back upon itself without any possibility of escape'. (Habermas 1987: 7)(Emphasis, Habermas's)

It is against this conceptualization of modernity as a philosophical category that I now proceed to discuss the philosophies of René Descartes and Immanuel Kant, both of whom may arguably be considered to be the most important contributors to the development of a philosophical conceptual framework capable of accommodating the rationalistic ethos of the modern scientific tradition. In this regard, their common commitment to reason as the only legitimize source of knowledge has resulted in the development of a philosophical model aimed at providing a rational justification and validation of scientific knowledge. Such a philosophical model would provide the *a priori* foundation of all knowledge claims, scientific as well as moral. In this regard, the question concerning the possibility of knowledge provides the impetus for the development of a new epistemological approach from the perspective of modernity in which science operates as the destroyer of all traditional forms of knowledge. The primary objective of both René Descartes and Immanuel Kant is therefore to establish a new philosophical model that is independent of traditional values and the traditional forms of epistemic justification of knowledge. At the root of their shared objective is a fundamental assumption that the production of knowledge is a cumulative process, that is, knowledge develops towards its own perfection.



The task of the epistemologist is to ensure that he constructs the normative basis of such progress in conjunction with the methods and principles of modern scientific and mathematical reasoning. From this perspective, Descartes's and Kant's approach proceed to establish foundations of certainty and truth for the modern forms of knowledge. Of particular significance in their joint philosophical enterprise is the central and centralizing role that is given to "the subject" ("the mind" or "consciousness"), as the defining feature of the philosophical tradition of modernity, and which as the rational foundation of modern philosophical tradition, must now provide the normative basis of the "universal" categories of rationality as the condition of the possibility of knowledge.

### **2.3.1 René Descartes: The search for absolute certainty**

Descartes (1596-1650) is regarded as the founder of modern philosophy. His project of methodological (or radical) doubt in the search for the philosophical foundations of certainty has had far reaching implications for the general understanding of modernity as a whole. For progress to take place one must be absolutely certain that one's knowledge claims are valid. Descartes's epistemological project reflects a fundamental assumption: true knowledge can only be established once the "eternal" laws of reason have been clarified.

Descartes's epistemological project is discussed in detail in a skillful step-by-step introspective manner in his treatise, *A Discourse on Method: Meditations and Principles*. It is written with such simplicity and depth that one almost misses what Richard J. Bernstein calls a "spiritual journey". (Bernstein 1983: 109) In one sense this work is autobiographical as Descartes proceeds to explain how he personally reaches the state of certainty regarding his own existence.

It was natural for Descartes, not only as a philosopher, but also particularly as a scientist and mathematician, to aspire to succeed in the attainment of a firm foundation of knowledge in science, metaphysics and religion. For this purpose he maintained that it is necessary to develop a methodology that will ensure that



all knowledge claims be founded on indisputable principles. Descartes is of the view that if philosophical scepticism can be defeated, then all knowledge can develop from a secure foundation of certainty.

In order to achieve his goal, Descartes seeks to develop a systematic method on which to base all epistemological inquiries with a view to providing the solid ground to ascertain, for example, the truth or falsity of scientific theories. Since he was a mathematician of the highest caliber and, therefore, familiar with the meticulousness of mathematical calculations and its reliability, he believed that a method that adheres to the fundamental principles of that discipline will also enable the philosopher to achieve the same results in the field of philosophy.

A further advantage of a mathematical model, according to Descartes, is that because observation is not a requirement; the researcher does not need to concern himself or herself with reality “out there”, given the fact that our senses sometimes deceive us. From this perspective, Descartes accordingly argued for the epistemological independence of the thinking subject, with the mathematical model of reasoning providing the guidance for the formulation of the “universal” foundation of knowledge. Universal truth will therefore find expression in universal propositions whose self-evidence will be demonstrated in and through the process of deductive reasoning.

In his *Meditations*, Descartes proceeds to investigate the possibility of absolute certainty by focussing on the possibility of doubt with regard to the methods of justification that characterize conventional thinking. In this regard, he ends up doubting just about everything, except his own doubting consciousness. He argues that since he is conscious that he thinks and doubts, he must undoubtedly naturally exist in order to perform the function of thinking and doubting. From this argument Descartes concludes, *I think, therefore I am*'. (Descartes 1965: xvii)(Emphasis, Descartes's) For Descartes, the thinking subject that doubts is capable of doubting that “he” thinks, and this provides him



with the philosophical foundation of certainty and truth. The epistemological subject is placed at the centre of philosophical thinking and modernity thus coincides with the philosophical defense of reason which now becomes a defense of subjective (universal) conditions of certainty originating from “within” the “mind” of that rational creature called “man” who now occupies a universal (central) position in the circle of knowledge and truth. Descartes accordingly states that ‘... the affirmation of the truth that the discoveries of reason are not made by deducing the particular from the universal, but from perceiving the universal in the individual instance’. (Descartes 1965: xiv)

As stated above, Descartes chooses the method of radical doubt to establish the philosophical foundation of certainty. He believes that anything and everything that can be doubted must be doubted; this is what he meant by the system of methodological or radical doubt. Descartes doubts the existence of the external world and the reliability of the senses that reveal the world to him. When trapped within the inner world of his own mind, however, Descartes has recourse to the “God” of the Christian faith to restore the link between the mind and the external world “out there”. For Descartes, the “God” of the Christian world, who created the universe, has also created the ideas of humans regarding that universe. Descartes accordingly argues that he gets the idea of an external reality from God, who is no deceiver, and because all things are dependent on him ‘... there can be no doubt that God possesses the power of producing all the objects I am able distinctly to conceive’. (Descartes 1965: 127) Moreover, Descartes employs this premise to reaffirm the truth-value of all scientific theories, as he is of the view that they rest on the attainment of truth and certainty concerning knowledge derived from notions based on logical reason and this logical reason is privileged insofar as it is guided by God-given ideas. It therefore rules by divine right.

Descartes’s argument for the independence of the mind (of the rational subject) from the external world inevitably leads him to defend a dualistic theory of reality, of an independent subject standing over and above an object. Although the mind



is distinct from the body and better known, Descartes recognizes that he cannot exist without the body. One is reliant on the body and senses for interaction with the world and others, and in general with all material objects. He claims that the body is divisible, extended and a non-thinking substance. However, despite the fact that the mind and body are separate and made up of unlike substances, they are closely linked and form a “unity”. The view of extension poses a problem, which Descartes resolves by the aspect of motion that, according to him, explains how empty space becomes occupied. Also it cannot be argued that we have no body for otherwise the experience of pain or hunger would not be felt. The brain transmits these sensations, as the mind is made conscious of what is taking place.

According to Descartes, the mind is pure substance whose essence is thinking and is considered immortal and unvarying, whereas changes of the body do occur. The essential characteristic of the mind is that it is not dependent on any material thing, including the body. It is indivisible, not extended, and therefore does not require any space, and is known more clearly than the body. In the discussion of the qualities of the mind Descartes refers to the soul and its attributes, namely, thoughts and perception. Besides this reference to the traits of the soul, Descartes also claims that there are crucial differences between the nature of thoughts and perception. For Descartes, a thinking entity is connected to the mind, whilst perception also depends on a body to fulfill its entire function.

It is important to recognize the paradox at the root of the Cartesian foundational project of philosophical certainty. For a philosophy such as Descartes, committed to a rational justification of modernity which frowns upon all non-modern forms of knowledge, it is interesting to note that a traditional belief in the “God” of Christianity ultimately provides the breakthrough into the realm of philosophical certainty. Modern reason needs its traditional faith in “God” to reassure it that its knowledge claims are true and therefore of universal significance. As Descartes reflects on whether he exists or not, he holds the



notion that since he doubts and is deceived at times, therefore there must be some “divine” revelation that can take him beyond the perils of self-doubt. He asserts quite confidently that this idea must come from a being that is more perfect than himself, and this idea leads him to conclude that for the idea of God to exist in his mind, there must be a God who has put this idea in his mind. How else can we explain the origin of the idea of God? From this perspective, the philosopher of modernity becomes the representative and custodian of God’s ideas of truth and knowledge on account of reason’s ability to “hook up” with a “God” beyond modernity.

In the next section, I will examine the philosophical efforts of Kant to ground his defense of modernity within certain (universal) categories of thought, once again reaffirming modernity’s commitment to the centrality of the modern subject whose autonomy from other non-forms of thought is the guarantee of the self-assurance and success of the project of modernity.

### **2.3.2 Immanuel Kant: The maturity of reason**

Kant (1724-1804) was one of the foremost academics of his day and part of the social order of the “Enlightenment” years. Not only did he uphold the fundamental doctrines of Enlightenment thinking, but he also developed its doctrines to greater heights, specifically the idea that the acquisition of all knowledge is possible through the faculty of reasoning by a process of *a priori* reasoning, that is, independently of sense experience. Even though Kant acknowledges the interdependence of the intellect (the subject) and sense experience (the object), there can be no doubt of the central importance that he attaches to the “subjective dimension” in the context of modern philosophical thinking. In Kant’s (1983: 84) own words:

If our subjective constitution be removed, the represented object, with the qualities which sensible intuition bestows upon it, is nowhere to be found, and cannot possibly be found. For it is this



subjective constitution which determines its form and appearance.  
(Kant, 1983: B 62)

In the context of modernity, the subject, by turning “inwards”, thus becomes the self-conscious source of enlightenment, and this “subjective turn” becomes the cornerstone of modern philosophy. For Kant, the privileging of the subject has a philosophical significance comparable to a “Copernican revolution” insofar as it presupposes a radical break from all traditional models of human self-understanding. In the language of Thomas S. Kuhn, *The structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), Kant believes that he is introducing a “paradigm shift”, the nature of which will forever change our understanding of ourselves as rational agents in a world governed by the laws of reason. As Kant (1983: 22) himself puts it:

Hitherto it has been assumed that all our knowledge must conform to objects. But all our attempts to extend our knowledge of objects by establishing something in regard to them *a priori*, by means of concepts, have, on this assumption, ended in failure. We must therefore make trial whether we may not have more success ... if we suppose that the objects must conform to our knowledge. This would agree better with what is desired, namely, that it should be possible to have knowledge of objects *a priori*, determining something in regard to them prior to their being given. We should then be proceeding precisely on the lines of Copernicus’ primary hypothesis. (Kant, 1983: B xvi)(Emphasis, Kant’s)

Given the centrality and privileging of the subject in his philosophy, Kant now proceeds to describe the nature and possibilities of an enlightened subject within the context of modernity. In this regard the concept of philosophical maturity as opposed to immaturity plays a significant part in his thinking. Kant is of the opinion that maturity is synonymous with moral responsibility and intellectual



autonomy or freedom. Freedom (or autonomy), however, presupposes moral responsibility because the rational agency of modern man is subject to a “moral law” that is universally applicable to all rational beings. According to Kant, the exercise of reason is a moral responsibility which requires intellectual maturity. This line of reasoning is spelt out in his famous essay, *What is Enlightenment?*, in which we read, ‘Enlightenment is man’s release from his self-incurred tutelage. ... “Have courage to use your own reason!” – that is the motto of enlightenment’. (Kant 1981: 85)

This Kantian view of intellectual maturity is reiterated by James Schmidt when he states, ‘*Enlightenment is mankind’s exit from its self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity* is the inability to make use of one’s own understanding without the guidance of another’. (Schmidt 1996: 58)(Emphasis, Schmidt’s) By establishing the principle of subjectivity (in the form of self-determination) as the fundamental principle of modernity, Kant challenges the modern subject to free himself from the irrational burden of tradition.

Kant contends that being moral actually implies being in harmony with the idea of freedom. He sets out to show that the idea of morality admits of the possibility of universality. From this perspective, the “moral law” is applicable to all rational beings and as such, it requires that the individual (as a moral subject) ought to be understood “*as an end withal, never as means only*”. (Stumpf (1975): 320)(Emphasis, Stumpf’s) In this regard, Kant postulates a form of “practical thinking” as being the appropriate source of moral reasoning and moral actions. By opposing the realm of practical reason (that is, moral-political thinking) to that of “pure” theoretical reason (that is, scientific or instrumental thinking), Kant seeks to maintain a fundamental distinction between two fundamental sources of reasoning. The freedom of the modern subject must therefore be defended on practical grounds. It is when this fundamental distinction is collapsed in favor of scientific rationality that the modern subject fails to acknowledge any other form of progress and enlightenment save that which originates in the realm of



scientific-technical thinking. This point is also reiterated by Jürgen Habermas when he writes:

The real difficulty in the relation of theory and *praxis* does not arise from this new function of science as a technological force, but rather from the fact that we are no longer able to distinguish between practical and technical power. Yet even a civilization that has been rendered scientific is not granted dispensation from practical questions. ... For then no attempt is made to attain a rational consensus on the part of citizens concerning the practical control of their destiny. Its place is taken by the attempt to attain technical control over history by perfecting the administration of society, an attempt that is just as impractical as it is unhistorical. (In Bernstein 1983: 43)(Emphasis, Bernstein's)

Kant holds the view that only moral conduct prompted by pure practical reason ensures the freedom of the subject. While pure reason enables one to understand the natural world by reflecting on the *a priori* transcendental conditions of the possibility of knowledge, it is the faculty of practical reason that provides the *a priori* rational grounds for understanding free will as the basis of our moral responsibility to acknowledge our duty to respect the "moral law". As Kant (1956: 84-85) puts it:

The moral law is, in fact, for the will of a perfect being a law of holiness. For the will of any other finite rational being, however, it is a law of duty, of moral constraint, and of determination of his actions through respect for the law and reverence for its duty. ... We stand under a discipline of reason, and in all our maxims we must not forget our subjection to it. ... Duty and obligation are the only names that we must give to our relation to the moral law. (Kant, 1956: 84-85)



Moreover, Kant claims that for a rational (free) will to be accepted as the foundation of the moral law, it must be made universally acceptable to other rational beings in the form of maxims that admit of the possibility of universal application. From this perspective, our principles of morality can escape the possibility of self-indulgent subjectivism and emotivism, and thus for “all rational agents”, the law becomes permissible.

Kant's view on morality has, of course, been challenged by many thinkers. In this regard, Robert Pippin (1991: 59) summarizes the respective critiques of Johann von Schiller (1759-1805) and Georg W. F. Hegel (1770-1831) as follows:

[O]nly an action motivated by pure practical reason, or done for the sake of the morally right, could be considered a truly free and morally worthy action. ... [they] wanted to know how Kant could distinguish between simply recognizing the principle under which “a purely rational agent” would act, and being motivated oneself to act that way. ... the issue was how one could be said, ... to determine oneself to make the moral law a motive for action. (Pippin 1991: 59)

It is relevant to mention here that for Kant, the possibility of morality rests on the possibility of the 'Is' (of pure reason) and the 'Ought' (of practical reason). However, MacIntyre's point of view that the moral law is conditional upon objectivity is questionable. Kant's argument that the possibility of morality as an objective and universal law based on practical reason does, however, represent an attempt to overcome the threat of instrumental rationality (that is a subject-object model of rationality), as the only appropriate form of rationality within the paradigm of modernity. Thus, although Kant is aware of the kind of certainty that informs the mathematical and scientific forms of reasoning, he does not fall into the trap of absolutising, and therefore privileging, the scientific mode of rationality. For Kant the realm of morality, falls outside the realm of object-



centred (objectivistic) thinking, and from this perspective, he defends human freedom as having its origins in a realm “beyond” that of physical reality. Morality and freedom are therefore necessarily “meta”-physical. For Kant, metaphysical dilemmas can only arise when we confuse a scientific model of rationality with a moral (practical) model of rationality, and as long as conceptual confusion persists, science (and the instrumental mode of rationality) will continue to dominate within the paradigm of modernity.

Kant’s moral position, insofar as it attempts to provide objective certainty to moral actions, has also opened him up to the charge of dogmatism. Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814), for example, has argued that ‘even the Kantian appeal to reason or to philosophy might be viewed as dogmatic or ungrounded unless we can show how such a commitment could be viewed as the “product” of a subject’s purely self-determining, or absolutely free activity’. (Pippin 1991: 58)

Kant has also been accused of circular reasoning insofar as he deploys reason to defend reason as the only legitimate basis of human freedom. Kant, however, defends himself by claiming that reason has its own framework and principles of judgment, and as such, it reveals the universal and necessary principles of rationality. He argues that, pure concepts originate exclusively in the mind and not in the external life world. Karl Jaspers explains the Kantian position as follows:

The pure concepts of the understanding must, to be sure, have their source in the nature of the mind, but this does not mean that they are brought about by the object or that they produce the object. (Jasper 1957: 243)

Kant’s defense of the autonomy and independence of the epistemological and moral subject thus provides us with the relevant framework for understanding modernity as a philosophical category. In spite of the differences in approach



between him and Descartes, there can be no doubting the importance that they both attach to the paradigm of subjectivity as the condition of the possibility of the modern philosophical tradition. It is therefore on the basis of the Cartesian-Kantian legacy that we will seek to engage with MacIntyre as a critic of modernity.

### **2.3.3 The Cartesian-Kantian legacy**

Underlying Descartes's philosophy is the necessity to arrive at absolute certainty that would verify and give a rational explanation of all knowledge. To this end he endeavoured to develop a methodology that would establish the indisputable foundation of certainty as the condition of the possibility of "true" knowledge. His argument was that if all uncertainty could be eliminated then modernity would be able to transcend the prejudice and superstition of traditional knowledge.

Kant, on the other hand, although he was not completely in agreement with Descartes's approach, namely, the view that in order to arrive at true knowledge after the application of a method of radical doubt with a view to revealing the (thinking) subject (in all his "splendid isolation") as the rational basis of philosophical certainty, he nevertheless shares Descartes's assumption regarding the universal subject as holding the key to the question of rationality and truth. The focal point of Kant primarily is the *a priori* assumptions (the "categories of understanding") that necessarily and unavoidably accompany the process of rational thinking. Whereas Descartes's method was fundamentally based on a foundational model and the mode of reaching undoubted knowledge through scepticism, Kant's mode of arriving at knowledge, on the other hand, was based on a "transcendental mode of reflection" that claimed to provide the foundation of the possibility of knowledge.

It is important to bear in mind the ethos of the Enlightenment period and relevance of the utilization of reason as a means to succeed in understanding the nature of knowledge and the rationale of its justification as opposed to the so-



called irrational and unsound issues that come about because of superstitious beliefs and dogmatic perspectives of the pre-modern world. For Kant one of the central doctrines of modernity was related to his ideals about what enlightenment actually meant, particularly his notions regarding the autonomy of the individual, which implies total independence as stated in the maxim of the Enlightenment Project, '*Sapere Aude!* "Have courage to use your own reason!" – '. (Kant 1981: 85)(Emphasis, Kant's)

It is well-known that Newton's scientific methodology influenced Kant's epistemological approach as it emphasized the universal condition of scientific knowledge. From this perspective, Kant was of the view that in spite of the tremendous success of the scientific methodology of Newtonian physics, it still needed the guiding principles of metaphysical thinking to provide the answer to a metaphysical need for coherence and unity. It is from this perspective that we must appreciate Kant's integrity when he writes, 'I have therefore found it necessary to deny knowledge, in order to make room for faith'. (Kant, 1965: B xxx) From Kant's point of view, therefore, scientific knowledge is blind unless enlightened by a model of rationality that illustrates its very possibility. Philosophical modernity, with all its faith in reason, must therefore go beyond the achievements of modern science in order to demonstrate the legitimacy of science, and thus of modernity as a historical and cultural manifestation of human progress. In order to accomplish this, however, it must defend its "faith" in reason on rational grounds that take us into the realm of metaphysical thinking. The Cartesian-Kantian legacy is therefore, in the final analysis, an act of faith.

## **2.4 Conclusion**

While it is acknowledged that Newton undoubtedly contributed extensively to scientific thinking, which lay at the root of the new consciousness of time, and in the process altered humankind's way of viewing the world, one still needs to be aware that both negative and positive consequences came about as a result of this new consciousness. It should be noted, while the modern world has indeed



made unbelievable strides in the domain of science and technology, it cannot be stated with any degree of conviction that all is well with modernity, especially with regard to the metaphysical-moral-political questions of freedom from human domination, oppression, exploitation, and other forms of human cruelty. It is necessary to mention that in recent times, scientists and other thinkers have become aware that just following Descartes's or Kant's universalistic approach to morality is problematic and inadequate to deal with an understanding of "man" as a creature of history, whose sense of right and wrong can only be understood from the perspective of the contingency of criteria whose validity is confined to specific cultural traditions. It is from this perspective that we will proceed to discuss MacIntyre's engagement with modernity in the chapter that follows.



## **Chapter Three**

### **Modernity: A project doomed to failure**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

In the previous chapter I showed that the project of modernity has been mainly understood in terms of an ideal of “philosophical enlightenment “, with specific reference to a scientific model of rationality as the barometer of progress. In this regard, I examined the respective efforts of Descartes and Kant to provide a (universal) normative framework for grounding the achievements of modern science by implicitly seeking to defend a basic assumption of a “universal subject” as the normative grounds for evaluating, and validating the knowledge claims of science. From this perspective, the central challenge of the modern philosopher is of a metaphysical and moral nature, since the modern philosopher has to provide the “spiritual” universal foundation of truth in a world that is clearly sceptical of all “otherworldly” explanations and all forms of “superstitions”. According to MacIntyre, modernity’s claim to universality in the name of scientific progress is a direct denial of “man” as a historical and social being, since the *a priori* grounds for validating such claims to universality are a direct denial of the historical-cultural dimensions of human existence. It is the denial that man is a historical-moral-political being, in the name of an abstract universal, that provides the major impetus for MacIntyre’s critical engagement with the defenders of modernity.

In this chapter, I intend to explore the nature and implications of MacIntyre’s critique of modernity. This will serve the purpose of providing the relevant context for assessing MacIntyre’s view that the Enlightenment Project is “doomed to failure”. (Stephen Mulhall and Adam Swift 1992: 95) MacIntyre’s critique of modernity will in turn provide the relevant context for a critical evaluation of emotivism and utilitarianism which, although they represent the dominant ethical



positions of modernity, must in MacIntyre's view, be seen as a major symptom of the pathological moral decline of modern "man".

My discussion of MacIntyre's critique of modernity will focus on of the following considerations:

- MacIntyre's interpretation and critique of modernity (3.2)
- Plato's allegory of the cave (as a philosophical frame of reference for understanding MacIntyre's characterization of modernity (3.2.1)
- Modernity: A culture in disarray (3.3)
- Emotivism in perspective (3.3.1)
- Utilitarianism in perspective (3.3.2)

### **3.2 MacIntyre's interpretation and critique of modernity**

MacIntyre's critical appraisal of modernity is based on his interpretation of the model of rationality associated with the modern scientific ideal of progress. In this regard, MacIntyre is especially disturbed by the moral and spiritual implications for the individual who must now reorient himself or herself in a society that has yielded completely to the authority of modern science. For MacIntyre, the uncritical acceptance of the scientific model of cognition as the one and only foundation of truth and progress in the reconstruction of modern society will invariably result in the moral-spiritual impoverishment of modern man insofar as modernity has abandoned its historical-cultural heritage in its pursuit of an unknown future. Modernity's abandonment of its moral-spiritual legacy is for MacIntyre the abandonment of 'man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-*telos*'. (MacIntyre 1985: 54)

MacIntyre argues therefore that the project of modernity has failed. He believes that it was doomed to failure from the moment of inception because of modern man's loss of historical consciousness, which is the bearer of his or her moral-spiritual legacy which modernity seeks to replace with the promise of progress in



the spirit of scientific-rational enlightenment. However, given the fragmentary nature of scientific knowledge, MacIntyre doubts whether modern man can restore a sense of moral consciousness that is capable of doing justice to our innermost yearning for spiritual meaning, coherence and stability, the lack of which only serves to reinforce the spiritual disorder that has accompanied the rise of modernity. As MacIntyre (1985) maintains, the modern person's disengagement from his or her traditional roots leads to social isolation and intellectual division and hence a deep void in not being able to reach out and understand "the other". MacIntyre is of the view that this fragmentation and disconnectedness that has accompanied the rise of modernity must understandably also have provided fertile soil for the growth of the liberal tradition of individualism that is so characteristic of the modern age. In the absence of a collectively shared *telos*, that is, a commonly shared moral-spiritual frame of reference, the modern individual must now function in accordance with a narrowly defined set of "rules" which will serve as the "rational" basis for the pursuit of his or her private ends. In the field of morality, the individual is condemned to function "on his own"; as a private agent in pursuit of private ends which will hopefully bring him or her "happiness". Modernity's rejection of traditional values that one shares with others as the condition of one's understanding of oneself as a "social-political animal" thus gives way to the introduction of the individual as a private agent for whom rationality is interpreted as the instrumental-technical means of achieving a particular (private) end(s).

For MacIntyre, the major challenge for modern man is the creation of a meaningful symbolic order that is capable of responding to the rational foundations of modernity. There is indeed a profound contradiction eroding the ethos of modernity: on the one hand, it defines itself on the basis of a universal claim to reason (albeit scientific reason), on the other hand, it is incapable of providing a rational justification for its claim to universality. MacIntyre's critique of modernity's claim to universality does indeed have profound implications for his own position. A modernity with a false claim to universality can only be a



modernity accountable to itself on its own terms: the paradox of modernity is engendered by its failure to recognize the relativity of its own position. In this regard, Neil Levy (1999: 471) captures the radical implication of relativism that inspires MacIntyre's critique of modernity when he (Levy) writes 'because of its universalistic pretensions, modern culture is therefore profoundly relativistic'. (Levy 1999: 471)

In *After Virtue* (MacIntyre 1985: 1-4), MacIntyre paints a "disquieting" scenario wherein he demonstrates the dilemma that characterizes the modern epoch. In this regard, one is reminded of the "allegory of the cave", as presented in Plato's *Republic*, in which the condition of man is likened to being imprisoned in a dark cave, where the majority are condemned to a twilight world of illusion, but where the gifted few (philosophers) are endowed with the intellectual-spiritual potential of discovering "the Truth" outside the cave.

### **3.2.1 Plato's allegory of the cave**

Plato introduces his symbolic tale concerning the transition from an unenlightened state to an enlightened state in a challenging way. Plato asks us to imagine some men living in a cave. They only see shadows on a wall caused by the glow of a fire. They never see the actual objects and also believe that the sounds heard originate from these shadows. Furthermore, they interpret their experience as being real as they are unfamiliar with anything else. The uneducated are not unlike prisoners since they too are, metaphorically speaking, held in "chains", that is, by their prejudices that hold them in bondage because of their fixed and limited views. Plato inquires, what if these men were released and forced to confront what existed behind the "shadows" and not just accept the reflections they see as truth itself? A normal reaction from prisoners would probably be to retreat as readjustment to another worldview is often fraught with challenges, some painful, others perhaps joyous. The allegory of the cave presents a dual state of consciousness; someone stepping out of the "darkness" into an acceptance of the gift of "light".



Uncertainty about aspects of true knowledge and appearance plays a significant role in understanding reality. Questions focussed on whether appearances represent truth become problematic since the “phantom-like” (Cornford 1973: 199) shadows seem real to those imprisoned. This is caused by the prisoners’ belief that the shadows represent genuine objects and accordingly the “whole truth”. (Desmond Lee 1983: 318) However, this view is shortsighted; as Stumpf points out, ‘A flower makes a shadow which gives very little, if any, indication of what a flower really looks like’. (Stumpf (1975): 53) Plato’s allegory suggests that most people live in darkness that distorts their vision, and in order to emerge from this state of affairs, humans need to be transformed by the unchanging radiance of the sun that enables the light to come through. An important implication of this view is to become enlightened through education.

Education, then, is a matter of *conversion*, a complete turning around from the world of appearance to the world of reality. “The conversion of the soul,” says Plato, “is not to put the power of sight in the soul’s eye, which already has it, but to ensure that, instead of looking in the wrong direction, it is turned the way it ought to be.” But looking in the right direction does not come easily. ... Similarly, when those who have been liberated from the cave achieve the highest knowledge, they must not be allowed to remain in the higher world of contemplation, but must be made to come back down into the cave and take part in the life and labors of the prisoners. (Stumpf (1975): 55)(Emphasis, Stumpf’s)

The above passage seems to sum up essential factors of the human condition as Plato sees it. It also conveys his opinion concerning the necessity of serving our fellow-beings. For instance, a former prisoner, although unwilling to return to the cave, is required to do so in order to be of some service to the community. This



service is praiseworthy notwithstanding the resistance that he or she might encounter from those who are unenlightened (in captivity).

However, despite the merits of knowledge, as such, Plato makes known that the "*idea* of the good" is the very foundation upon which truth and knowledge are structured and hence absolutely essential. (Bloom 1968: 517c)(Emphasis, Bloom's) Its enduring qualities are validated in the principles of moral conduct and consequences experienced. But, besides that, Plato claims that becoming conscious of the 'good is the culminating point of a man's education and enables him to understand everything else'. (D. J. O'Connor 1964: 21)

There appears to be similarities in considering what both Plato and MacIntyre are attempting to impart in their allegories, namely, that morality is an interrelated aspect of all true knowledge. However, it is interesting to note that different points of view are held by both concerning controversies. MacIntyre claims that controversies result in endless disagreements; on the other hand, Plato understood that controversies are caused by 'each one's looking at a different aspect of the reality'. (Stumpf (1975): 55)

In MacIntyre's "allegory of modern man" however, there is no possibility of escaping from the shackles of modernity by believing that the universalistic pretensions of modern science can "deliver" on the promise of moral-spiritual enlightenment. It is the failure to "deliver" that leads to modernity's confusion as to what ought to be classified as right or wrong. Modern society's moral standards are either practically absent or in a state of complete disarray. Communities have lost their traditional goals and customary means of communication, and hence their direction and stability. A normative moral code of conduct appears to be unintelligible, and therefore meaningless, to modern humankind.



J. E. Barnhart (1977: 43-44) is in agreement with MacIntyre's claim that 'men first of all lost any over-all social agreement as to what is the right way to live together, and so ceased to be able to make sense of any [theological] claims to moral authority'. MacIntyre emphasizes this standpoint in relation to what he describes as being symptomatic, as well as the cause, of the major disintegration of moral standards, thereby also bringing about man's indifference to the question of the "meaning of life" in the context of modernity. For MacIntyre, the transitions and modifications that have arisen as a consequence of modernity's rejection of traditional patterns of thought concerning moral-spiritual issues, have introduced a moral-spiritual pathology as a result of the modern faith that human conduct can adequately be accounted for by the methods of modern science. If nature can successfully be conceived of as a "machine" subject to the law of cause and effect, and thus render itself susceptible to the scientific predictions of man, then why should we seek for a different principle to understand and predict the nature of human conduct? Modern humankind, without his or her spiritual dimension, is therefore reduced to a bundle of selfish desires whose satisfaction can be accounted for in purely psychological terms. In short, the (private) ego, driven by selfish greed for the sake of the survival of the individual, becomes the basis of modernity's self-understanding as moral-political beings. This point of view is exemplified in the writings of modern contract theorists such as John Locke and David Hume as they 'tried to give an account of personal identity solely in terms of psychological states or events'. (MacIntyre 1985: 217) It is this state of affairs that MacIntyre has in mind when he presents us with his own (modern) version of Plato's allegory of the cave.

In his own version of the allegory of the cave, MacIntyre emphasizes the destruction that has come in the wake of modernity's overemphasis on the authority and legitimacy of science as the foundation of rationality and enlightenment (wisdom). He invites his reader to imagine a situation in which science, as an actively pursued process of knowledge, has all but disappeared. All we are left with are bits and pieces of knowledge, stored in our individual



memories. All our books have been destroyed; our language has changed, and, as a result, there has been a radical transformation of conceptual schemes. Moreover, ideas concerning theoretical and practical issues are vague and, as a result, problematic. The new cultural climate has prompted agents to reinterpret things in entirely different ways in order to resolve the prevalent confusion. Wherever deemed necessary, unorthodox strategies are in order since the goal is that sense can and should be made of a rather difficult situation. In view of the fact that difficulties are part of life, and therefore unavoidable, some people might casually conclude that everything is “fine” as it is, while others might not even be aware that something is critically wrong since they conclude that this is the way things are supposed to be.

The situation described above does indeed admit of several plausible reactions. One may argue; for example, how can something be “fine” if one does not even know that something is lost or missing? Another may argue that even though something is missing, knowledge begins with the self-realization concerning one’s own ignorance about that which is missing in much the way that Socrates made a virtue out of his own ignorance. Modernity’s response, however, is to start anew; to build from the foundation “upwards”. But how should modernity proceed to regain dependable guidelines when it refuses, in principle, to take into account the teachings of tradition? From this perspective, D. Z. Phillips correctly poses the question, ‘If *all* we have are remnants of moral discourse which, divorced from their moral original contexts, lack sense, from what moral source can we be informed of our confusion?’ (Phillips 1984: 111)(Emphasis, Phillips’s)

In contrast to the emphasis placed by modernity on science as a radical movement of progress, moral ideals seem to have lost their legitimacy and universal relevance. The inability to judge and evaluate moral actions on the basis of universally acceptable principles does indeed point to a “moral crisis” (J. B. Schneewind 1983: 536) within modernity for MacIntyre. Accordingly, MacIntyre declares that this dilemma has come about because modernity lacks



the standards and the means to place moral thinking, on a rational and practical basis that is universally acceptable. In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre is of the view that the modern individual is governed by preferences that sustain a culture that encourages moral disagreement. Carl Wellman (1975: 214) also draws attention to this state of affairs when he remarks that moral 'disagreements seem to be in sharp contrast to our almost universal agreement about the validity or invalidity of any proposed deductive argument'. Be that as it may, MacIntyre is basically determined to establish an ethical system that resembles that of Aristotle as expounded in the latter's *Nicomachean Ethics*, (MacIntyre 1985: 147), and based on the communalistic value system of the city-state of ancient Greece. MacIntyre is deeply impressed by the idea of a "cosmic order", so central to the thought of thinkers such as Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas. The latter states, for example, that 'there exists a cosmic order which dictates the place of each virtue in a total harmonious scheme of human life'. (In Richard J. Bernstein 1986: 134)

MacIntyre's refusal to collapse scientific and ethical thinking into one form of rationality is the animating impulse behind his critical analysis and investigation of modernity. This refusal notwithstanding, MacIntyre wants to be able to apply the same standards of consistency and reliability associated with the scientific mode of reasoning to the realm of moral thinking. In this regard, he is clearly indebted to Aristotle who was of the opinion that moral reasoning consists in a comprehensible and logical method that 'provided a context in which evaluative claims functioned as a particular kind of factual claim'. (In Gary Kitchen 1997: 73) But is one justified in expecting the same results from ethics (that is, the same certainty) that one has come to associate with science? Science is, after all, concerned with conceptualizing a basic objective reality "out there", while ethics is concerned with our understanding of a more "subjective" dimension of values and emotions. Moreover, unlike objective reality that may be assumed to have an ontological status that is somehow independent of the knowing subject, value systems can, and do indeed, differ from one cultural tradition to another. And even if morality originates within the subjective realm of emotions, does this



mean that they are, in principle, beyond the scope of rational understanding? Can one, furthermore, just accept that because virtue differs from culture to culture, this is further proof of the subjective (irrational) nature of morality? MacIntyre argues that despite variations of the “lists” of vocabulary and disagreement or agreement about ethical values, at the heart of a moral system of every cultural group one can detect explicit qualities that exemplify or are typical of moral conduct, and thus MacIntyre asserts ‘the fact that virtue is an excellence is uncontroversial, and to that extent there is at least a minimal core concept of virtue’. (Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski 1996: 88)

MacIntyre’s choice to rehabilitate the Aristotelian approach to ethics is motivated by the apparent success in reconciling standards of value with standards of scientific truth, in short, in spite of the clear distinction between theoretical (scientific) reasoning and moral (practical) reasoning, Aristotle succeeded in presenting a holistic account of the nature of rationality. According to MacIntyre, modernity should also be able to offer us a holistic account of rationality, that is, one that takes into account the scientific as well as moral dimensions of rationality, without the one form of rationality being privileged at the expense of the other. It is precisely in respect of modernity’s failure to provide such an account of rationality, given its privileging of the scientific mode of reasoning, that modernity as a “project fails”. (MacIntyre 1985: 66) The wisdom of the ancients is thus rejected in favour of the more limited “wisdom” emanating from the modern form of instrumental rationality.

It is crucial for MacIntyre that modernity finds a universal focal point for its understanding of morality while, at the same time, maintaining a clear distinction between value statements, on the one hand, and empirical statements, on the other hand. Statements will accordingly be evaluated as being factually “true or false”, and morally “right or wrong”. It should be noted, therefore, that although something may be factually true, it does not follow that we can make any moral judgments based upon that truth. Thus, increased knowledge or progress in



technology does not in any way imply increased knowledge of ourselves as moral beings, but this does not imply that morality is at best of an arbitrary or conventional nature. We have the capacity to choose beyond the “good and evil” prevalent in a particular society for the sake of a “higher” moral truth. It is this form of reasoning that distinguishes MacIntyre’s position from the more “subjectivist” position of thinkers such as David Hume who, for example, states:

Since morals, therefore, have an influence on the actions and affections, it follows, that they cannot be deriv’d from reason; and that because reason alone, as we have already prov’d, can never have any such influence. Morals excite passions, and produce or prevent actions. Reason of itself is utterly impotent in this particular. The rules of morality, therefore, are not conclusions of our reasons. (Hume 1969: 509)

Unlike Hume, MacIntyre seeks to establish a rational basis for understanding morality, the nature of which has a direct bearing on the integrity and dignity of the individual. This calls for the type of “moral education” that empowers the individual in his or her search for moral excellence or virtue in any given situation. Clearly, MacIntyre is calling for the moral (practical) education of modern man, the possibility of which must be sought beyond the strategic-technical rationality of modern technocratic Western society. Bernstein’s distinction between the “technical” and “practical” mode of reasoning, illustrates this point:

*Techne*, or a technique is learned and can be forgotten, we can “lose” a skill. But ethical “reason” can neither be learned nor forgotten. ... Man always finds himself in an “acting situation” and he is always obliged to use ethical knowledge and apply it according to the exigencies of his concrete situation. (Bernstein 1983: 147)



On the subject of the objective methods utilized by science, MacIntyre is insistent and committed to what he claims is of paramount importance within the context of maintaining an equilibrium which, from the perspective of modernity, implies that support should be given to the practical nature of reasoning. The role of rational and logical thinking should not be overlooked in the respective disciplines of science and ethics. The major implication of this “broader” conception of rationality within modernity is that modernity should understand itself as a project-of-dialogue, rather than a project-of-science. In this regard, the rules of science, just like the rules of morality, could be tested and retested (*ad infinitum*) in the light of new experiences, as modernity constantly seeks to recognize the relativity of its own progress. Bernstein emphasizes this point when he argues that the nature of science is not just the acquisition of knowledge, but more appropriately, science should be directed towards the “practical character of such rationality”. (Bernstein 1983: 57)

### **3.3 Modernity: A culture in disarray**

According to MacIntyre, modernity’s major weakness is its lack of historical consciousness, and its failure to recognize the communitarian nature of human existence. One of the most fundamental aspects of modernity is its emphasis on individual autonomy that has led to a process of re-evaluation linked to identity and meaning, which in turn has progressed into the secularization of social practices as it ‘sought the demystification and desacralization of knowledge and social organization in order to liberate human beings from their chains’. (Harvey 1989: 3) The core of MacIntyre’s criticism is modernity’s downward trend of moral behaviour as it is ‘essentially a reflection of our cultural condition and lacks the resources to correct its disorders’. (MacIntyre 1979: 16) This state of affairs has caused interminable controversies regarding reasons why, for example, wars in certain instances happen and are nevertheless justified as moral, from a particular perspective, but equally immoral from another perspective. McIntyre is of the opinion that modernity’s lack of *telos* is essentially to blame for this self-defeating moral relativism. Modernity has, so to speak, lost its anchor in a



shared communitarian way of life, the basic perquisite for the “good life”. For MacIntyre, being immersed in a communitarian way of life represents the nucleus of humankind’s ability to live well. In this regard, a return to the “community” as the source of wisdom and virtue, the individual can combat the destructive effects of a mechanistic society driven by the impulses of selfish greed and self-aggrandizement, made desirable by the laws of the “free” market system of capitalism. In place of the idea of competitive success, MacIntyre seeks to restore the “traditional” values of solidarity, friendship, and cooperation. The (economic-technical) power of progress as promised by modernity can only result in the moral-spiritual collapse of the modern individual. As David Harvey puts it:

There is a mode of vital experience – experience of space and time, of the self and others, of life’s possibilities and perils – that is shared by men and women all over the world today. I will call this body of experience ‘modernity’, ‘To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world – and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are. Modern environments and experiences cut across all boundaries of geography and ethnicity, of class and nationality, of religion and ideology; in this sense, modernity can be said to unite all mankind. But it is a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity; it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish. To be modern is to be part of a universe in which, as Marx said, “all that is solid melts into air”. (Harvey 1989: 10-11)

MacIntyre claims that modernity’s total reliance on scientific reason as a sole factor for gaining knowledge could be misleading, as it frequently results in imbalances. This does not mean, however, that MacIntyre questions the significance of modernity’s revolutionary scientific discoveries. More to the point,



MacIntyre feels that modern man has lost his spiritual bearings, given the mechanistic nature of modern psychology. While MacIntyre acknowledges the groundbreaking events of the “age of reason” (Bauman 1987: 76), and the advances made by science, modernity is also blind to the moral significance of human solidarity as experienced, for example, in personal relationships of friendship, family ties and public associations. These forms of solidarity are the cornerstones of our moral-political lives. MacIntyre claims that the destabilizing effects of modernity are directly attributable to the structural (Institutional) changes that have taken place in the economic and political arenas. In this regard, politics and economics, instead of being concerned with the wellbeing of its citizens in a political order of justice, have instead been reduced to the “technical management” of a consumerist society in which the individual is just another consumer or non-consumer in a market-driven mass society. MacIntyre criticizes the function that the “manager” occupies in the workplace as modern society is handed over to the anonymous authority of state bureaucracy for guidance and leadership. Organizations have accordingly developed into “specialist” ordered establishments, with its institutions governed by state rules as a substitute for religious authority. MacIntyre is highly critical of a rule-governed state and the introduction by the scientific community of “rational instrumentality” as the equivalent of wisdom in the modern age. Zygmunt Bauman cogently illustrates the significance of this point as follows:

Control has been taken over by other forces – by autonomous institutions of specialized research and learning, needing no validation but that constantly replenished by their own, institutionally supported procedural rules, or by equally autonomous institutions of commodity production, needing no validation other than the productive potential of their own technology. (Bauman, 1987: 158)



Despite the specific merits of individual autonomy, MacIntyre argues that mass mentality causes, in the first place, an environment that creates alienation not merely among fellow beings, but also between employer and employee, and a mass society based on capitalist materialist values can only exacerbate the division of material inequality between the “haves” and the “have-nots”. The average individual with his or her “rights” must necessarily become a disillusioned cynic and misfit in a society that promises so much but delivers so little. All that he or she has left to function in modern society is a legal sense of right and wrong; the moral values that ought to inform the legal institutions and political constitutions of the modern state, have simply been left “behind”, thus opening up a public domain where the “law of the jungle” is given respectability by the laws of the free market system.

According to MacIntyre, with the rejection of earlier belief systems, the notion of arbitrariness has been introduced into Western civilization. Modernity’s failure to produce a universal foundation of rationality capable of doing justice to the theoretical (scientific) and practical (moral-political) dimensions of human life has condemned modernity to failure. The major consequence of this failure is the inability to reach agreement on the nature of the “good life” beyond the technical and economic realm of progress. This has resulted in what Bernstein (1986a: 135) has called “the rage against the Enlightenment”. It is as if, in spite of all the promises of modern enlightenment, the moral ethos of modernity is increasingly characterized by apathy, cynicism and powerlessness as the modern individual can no longer find the moral-political resources to relate to the other as a fellow human being.

### **3.3.1 Emotivism in perspective**

MacIntyre argues that the fact that “ethics is now fashionable” (MacIntyre 1979: 17) is indicative not only of the impermanence of modernity’s system of values, but also of the general acceptance of emotivism, the most fundamental characteristics of which are its individualism and its relentless pursuit of change



(for the sake of change). MacIntyre singles out Max Weber as one of the most representative advocates of emotivism, given the latter's claim regarding the non-rational (or irrational or emotional) origin of values. In connection with MacIntyre's views on Weber it should be noted that Jürgen Habermas also refers to Weber in a similar manner insofar as he (Habermas) evaluates modernity in terms of the "deformed realization of reason in history". (Bernstein 1984: 4) In this regard, Habermas claims that the rationalization process requires not only 'the elaboration of categories and concepts for a systematic examination of the character and different modes of rationality, but an explanation of how they are concretely embodied in social and cultural life'. (Bernstein 1984: 4) Besides, Habermas inquires whether one can claim that standards still exist, given that problems caused by emotivism have led to relativism and decisionism, hence promoting the stance that 'ultimate norms are arbitrary and beyond rational warrantability'. (Bernstein 1984: 4) We will discuss Habermas's approach to the problem of emotivism in more detail in Chapter Five.

In order to call attention to the significance of Weber's "distinction between rational and non-rational discourse", MacIntyre (1985: 30) asks his reader to reflect on three representative figures of modernity, namely, the "Aesthete", the "Therapist" and the "Manager". Each of these figures embodies specific attributes the possession of which renders the practice and pursuit of morality extremely problematic. For example, MacIntyre emphasizes the function of the "Manager" who, through his manipulative actions, exerts power and authority over his or her employees. This type of manipulative action is part of the modern corporate world. More often than not, people take the managerial character as a role model because they are able or inclined to identify with this character, since the manager as a personality projects an irresistible image of power, authority and control. In this regard, morality is identified with success and the domination of others. The status and role of "the Manager" is legitimated by means of "moral fictions". (MacIntyre 1985: 73) Given the fact that the real motives are camouflaged in a bureaucratic oriented culture; 'any genuine distinction between



manipulative and non-manipulative social relations' (MacIntyre 1985: 23) becomes obscure. Moreover, MacIntyre asserts that no rational argument can be rationally defended because the moral agent claims that the value of one's actions can only be defended on "subjective" (that is, emotional) grounds or preferences. Therefore MacIntyre maintains in *After Virtue* that Egon Bittner's comment concerning Weber is justified. As Bittner puts it:

While Weber is quiet clear, ... in stating that the sole justification of bureaucracy is its efficiency, he provides us with no clear-cut guide on how this standard of judgment is to be used. Indeed, the inventory of features of bureaucracy contains not one single item that is not arguable relative to its efficiency function. (MacIntyre 1985: 74-75)

MacIntyre claims that besides emotivism, modernity must also face the dilemmas of moral relativism. He argues that 'our society stands at the meeting-point of a number of different histories, each of them the bearer of a highly particular kind of moral tradition, each of those traditions to some large degree mutilated and fragmented by its encounter with the others'. (MacIntyre 1979: 17) For MacIntyre, modernity's lack of language coordination is palpable proof of the fragmentary nature of its social structures. It would seem as though modernity is guilty of having appropriated a category of virtues from another epoch, whilst at the same time, disregarding the historical and cultural context in which those virtues once enjoyed legitimacy. This state of affairs, MacIntyre believes, can only lead to an ethos of moral uncertainty. As he puts it:

What we possess, if this view is true, are the fragments of a conceptual scheme, parts which now lack those contexts from which their significance derived. We possess indeed the simulacra of morality, we continue to use many of the key expressions. But



we have – very largely, if not entirely – lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, of morality. (MacIntyre 1985: 2)

MacIntyre persistently argues that the devastating impact of emotivism on the project of modernity is the primary cause of its failure to create a communal bond of solidarity among its people. In this regard, he argues that ‘all evaluative judgments and more specifically all moral judgments are *nothing but* expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling, insofar as they are moral or evaluative in character. Particular judgments may of course unite moral and factual elements’. (MacIntyre 1985: 11-12)(Emphasis, MacIntyre’s)

From the perspective of his critique of emotivism, MacIntyre is of the view that the private nature of morality within the context of modernity makes it impossible to provide a universal basis for evaluating questions of “right and wrong”, thus giving rise to an interminable process of moral disagreements and disputes, the resolution of which is doomed to perpetual failure. The phenomenon of moral relativism is therefore inseparably linked to the project of modernity. In the final analysis, morality is a function of a particular situation, and the individual's sense of morality will depend on strategic considerations aimed at successfully attaining a particular end.

Whilst the theories of emotivism and relativism did not originate during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, they certainly acquired a new legitimacy within the context of modernity. For MacIntyre, however, the theory of emotivism is indicative of a moral degeneration that originated in modernity’s rejection of tradition. More specifically, modernity’s inability to come to terms with its past has only served to uproot the modern individual from a meaningful (that is, humane) relationship and association. For MacIntyre, the “good life” is only possible in and through a meaningful and creative interaction with tradition; modernity’s disregard of tradition means that it cannot elevate itself to the level of human solidarity. From this perspective, modernity is therefore enclosed within



itself, and it is basically characterized by a clash of incommensurable value systems. In this regard, MacIntyre's thinking is strongly reminiscent of Charles Taylor's position when the latter asserts:

Short of actually confronting a case of terminal incommensurability, evaluative strategies should assume the possibility of achieving universal understanding and validity. ... because he believes it is impossible to live one's life meaningfully as a relativist. Personal identity requires values with a constitutive meaning. Therefore, these values cannot be held *relatively* but must be taken as having moral authority transcending a purely idiosyncratic perspective. ... when faced with significant cultural or moral conflict, one must adopt an *absolute* rather than a *relative* defense of the cultural values constitutive of one's identity. (In Tate 1998: 20-21)(Emphasis, Tate's)

It is worthy of note that Jean-Jacques Rousseau expresses the crux of the emotivistic attitude, when he substitutes Descartes' celebrated dictum 'I think therefore I exist,' with 'I feel therefore I exist'. (Harvey 1989: 19) Even if, according to MacIntyre, emotivism has created numerous difficulties, is it not fair to say this theory brought about a major movement away from being primarily focussed on the reasoning faculty being the sole means of acquiring knowledge. Then again, keeping in mind MacIntyre's intention to found morality on objective norms, the question is whether the emotivistic line of reasoning can ever be the right road to follow? According to MacIntyre, this certainly is not the method to advance since he claims that establishing moral validity on preferences simply misconstrues the meaning of honouring values. In this regard, he asserts that 'what purported to be appeals to objectivity were in fact expressions of subjective will'. (MacIntyre 1985: 113) In addition, he reminds the reader that objectivity can also be attained independently of pursuing a scientific approach. This position is alluded to when he says that 'we do not relinquish the notion of objective truth –



quite the contrary. ... we get conceptual relativity, and truth relative to a scheme'. (Bernstein 1983: 76)

At this juncture, it should be noted that owing to MacIntyre's implicit rationale that everything is historically interconnected it is not surprising, regardless of his misgivings about emotivism, that he should make the claim that this theory too has a place in the societal narrative. This attitude is shown in his comment, 'let us instead consider emotivism as a theory which has been advanced in historically specific conditions'. (MacIntyre 1985: 14) It is significant that for MacIntyre, invoking "subjective" grounds as the basis of morality is not an "individual" problem, but a societal problem. As a result, he claims that the adoption of an emotivist stance should not remain uncontested because the negative effects derived from this approach are contradictory to exemplary and moral conduct. Moreover, the inability to identify with a certain point of view, or be associated with a specific social group, creates a milieu that depends on frequently unacceptable choices being made. This in turn encourages a culture of endless contradictions that undermines the possibility of developing an authentic sense of "self".

Despite MacIntyre's respect for the unique qualities of a person, he nonetheless disapproves of the damaging consequences of the autonomous individual's emphasis on subjective preferences. In order to corroborate his position that decisions are regularly determined from an individualistic perspective, he discusses the diverse attitudes involving abortions. In this regard, for instance, he points out that if one is a follower of a certain religious group, then it is wrong to consent to an abortion. On the other hand, the mother-to-be might argue that she has the final say. In other words, the 'absence of a shared rational criterion' can lead to an 'arbitrariness in each one of us – or so it seems'. (MacIntyre 1979: 17)



Another negative factor resulting from emotivism is that, ironically, although modern society has become conscious of the necessity of moral practices yet, at the same time, it is unable to provide a suitable means to establish an ethical approach. A possible explanation for this way of thinking is that the person displays an unconditional acceptance of his or her own egoism, and simply does what he or she prefers. The individual furthermore reacts to experiences as dictated by inclinations and unfortunately, more often than not, without due consideration for another. Regrettably this type of condition seems to be at the root of most debates where an exchange of ideas takes place, particularly on the subject of values.

A further objection to emotivism is that when personal preferences are the yardstick whereby moral standards are to be evaluated, it simply presupposes a set of moral judgments regarding claims of right and wrong, without the possibility of adducing the principles in the light of which modernity can defend the ethical basis of such claims. This in turn leads to contradictions and inconsistencies that exclude the possibility of resolution, thereby resulting in an “unprincipled” society. As MacIntyre puts it:

What is wrong with being morally unprincipled is not primarily that one is being *inconsistent* and it is not even clear that the unprincipled *are* inconsistent, for it seems to be the case that in order to be practically inconsistent, one first needs to have *principles*. (Otherwise what is it about one that is inconsistent?)

... where by “principled” we mean something much more than any notion of rationality can supply. (MacIntyre 1979: 18)(Emphasis, MacIntyre’s)

We now turn to another aspect of MacIntyre’s critique of modernity, his assessment of the utilitarian ethical system.



### 3.3.2 Utilitarianism in perspective

According to MacIntyre, utilitarianism is the inevitable and unavoidable articulation of emotivism. It is a school of thought aimed at promoting “the greatest happiness of the greatest number” (Harold H. Titus and Morris Keeton 1973: 153) of people, thus focussing on the feelings of the majority. At the centre of this doctrine is the supposition that good consequences for the majority should be the gauge whereby wellbeing is judged. Utilitarianism originated in Great Britain approximately at the end of the seventeenth century. Some earlier major contributors were Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) and Henry Sidgwick (1838-1900). In line with the prevailing objectives of the Enlightenment Project, utilitarianism dismissed traditional values and claimed morality was predominantly motivated by what Jeremy Bentham (a universalistic hedonistic act utilitarian) says is at the source of an agent’s actions, namely, pleasure-seeking and the avoidance of pain. At the root of the utilitarian doctrine is an image of “man” as a being driven by self-interest.

Bentham maintains that hedonistic utilitarianism is a realistic doctrine since it highlights mankind’s basic nature and asserts that activities are morally acceptable or unacceptable in relation to the pleasure or pain that it produces, whereas George E. Moore, as an idealistic utilitarian, ‘will hold that the goodness or badness of a state of consciousness can depend on things other than its pleasantness. ... on various intellectual and aesthetic qualities’. ... He may even hold the idea that some pleasant states of mind can be intrinsically bad, and some unpleasant ones intrinsically good’. (J. J. C. Smart 1967: 207) Although there seems to be conflicting opinions regarding morality, utilitarianism suggests the application of a normative ethical structure on ‘how we *ought* to think about conduct, or it may be put forward as a system of descriptive ethics, that is, an analysis of how we *do* think about conduct’. (Smart 1967: 207)(Emphasis, Smart’s) However, the most significant sorts of utilitarianism



seem to be act-utilitarianism and rule-utilitarianism, which Smart describes as follows:

Act-utilitarianism is the view that the rightness or wrongness of an action is to be judged by the consequences, good or bad, of the action itself. Rule-utilitarianism is the view that the rightness or wrongness of an action is to be judged by the goodness and badness of the consequences of a rule that everyone should perform the action in like circumstances. (Jonathan Glover 1990: 199)

In so far as act-utilitarianism is concerned, actions that provide for the welfare of the greatest number is considered right, and wrong only if the smallest number receive benefits. Besides, MacIntyre claims that utilitarianism is reminiscent of emotivism in that 'no action is ever right or wrong *as such*'. (MacIntyre 1985: 15)(Emphasis, MacIntyre's) Rule-utilitarianisms, by and large, hold the stance that any action has a temporary status because its continuance is conditional upon the outcome. In line with this reasoning, rules are subject to assessment and therefore review which, in turn, are dependent upon changing situations and events, and not on a fixed set of regulations. From the previous statements it can be concluded that this standpoint would also be in direct contradiction to Kant's way of thinking, because utilitarianism implies the possibility that, immorality could be condoned if it would, in spite of the circumstances, allow its basic principle to apply, namely, the attainment of happiness for the maximum number of participants.

Another crucial feature of utilitarianism is that it holds an "*impersonal moral view*" (Michael Slote 1995: 892)(Emphasis, Slote's) since it asserts that:

our obligations depend on an impersonal assessment of the consequences of our actions, and if we have a choice between



doing more for strangers or less for ourselves ...then we must give preference to the strangers. (Slote 1995: 892)

However, this impartial stance towards “strangers” presents problems for ordinary common sense thinking as people normally regard the “self” and those who are close as being the most important, and because of this, should receive preferential treatment. Utilitarians embrace this standpoint about others since it is assumed that everyone should be entitled to equal rights. Furthermore, utilitarianism maintains that a strong point of this theory is the replacement of moral intuitions with a standardized method of solving moral issues that is grounded in the conception of “usefulness”. Within this context, Bentham also claims that ‘our duty is to maximize the balance of pleasure over pain in life’. (Titus and Keeton 1973: 153) The implication of this viewpoint with regard to ethical matters is also negative according to MacIntyre, since how can moral conduct be measured as good or even right on the basis of the following statement ‘If there is a balance in favor of pleasure, the act is a good act’. (Titus and Keeton 1973: 154) In light of this assertion, Bernard Mayo (1986:40) claims a ‘good action is not the same as a right action’.

MacIntyre asserts that the standpoint that, ‘Utilitarians perceive the self as always able to choose the most beneficial or least harmful course of action open to it, *whatever* that may involve the self in doing’ (MacIntyre 1979: 21)(Emphasis, MacIntyre’s) is unacceptable. He rejects the claim that utility and consequences of actions of the majority should be judged as the basic criterion by which to evaluate whether something is good or bad. For example, he is critical of George E. Moore’s argument that ‘every action is to be evaluated solely by its consequences’. (MacIntyre 1985: 15) In accordance with this, MacIntyre states that to found a value system expressly on the notion of utility is inappropriate since some actions or functions do not automatically bring about the most favourable results. Other attitudes that seem illogical to MacIntyre is the position, endorsed by utilitarians, namely, that it is rational to interfere with someone’s



“rights” merely for the sake of “utility”, and also the view that inclusion of the “*telos*”, as presented by Aristotle, is *passé*. So, it is hardly surprising that he is critical of Jeremy Bentham’s thinking:

His innovative psychology provided a view of human nature in the light of which the problem of assigning a new status to moral rules can be clearly stated; and Bentham did not flinch from the notion that he was assigning a new status to moral rules and giving a new meaning to key moral concepts. Traditional morality was on his view pervaded by superstition; it is not until we understood that the only motives for human action are attraction to pleasure and aversion to pain that we can state the principles of an enlightened morality, for which the prospect of the maximum pleasure and absence of pain provides a *telos*. (MacIntyre 1985: 62)(Emphasis, MacIntyre’s)

Within this context MacIntyre’s critical response to utilitarianism is further emphasized as he claims that, along with other reasons, this theory failed because Bentham and John S. Mill were unable to ‘provide an adequate foundation for the principle of utility and a way of connecting moral motivation with a psychology of self-interest’. (John Horton and Susan Mendus 1994: 141) In other words their theory lacks rational support as well as justification. The counter-argument that both, Bentham and Mill present, namely, that given a specific situation concerning a reaction to an incident or reaching a conclusion about something, they point out that the agent ‘did not fail in their own terms’. (Horton and Mendus 1994: 132) However, this kind of response does not hold since this rejoinder can be applicable or given to justify any form of practice or argument, and it is certainly not persuasive enough.

In addition, there exist several other issues that MacIntyre finds problematic in connection with utilitarianism. First, regarding utilitarianism and its view of moral



practices, MacIntyre holds that the theory of utilitarianism 'cannot accommodate the distinction between goods internal to and goods external to a practice'. (MacIntyre 1985: 198) For MacIntyre, this poses a problem since the internal and external properties of practices are vital for his critique that is centred on the collapse of values. Second, regarding issues associated with liberalism and utilitarianism MacIntyre claims that 'the debate between the deontological and utilitarian versions of liberal individualism actually masks the dominance of instrumental reasoning'. (Horton and Mendus 1994: 128) What is more, taking into account his attitude towards instrumental reasoning, it makes sense that he is in disagreement with the position adopted by utilitarians concerning the appraisal of values. MacIntyre argues:

On a direct utilitarian view, moral evaluation is a form of instrumental evaluation: acts are not right or obligatory because of their inherent character, their underlying motives, or their relation to divine or social dictates, but because of how much overall human or sentient well-being they *produce*. (Slote 1995: 890)(Emphasis, Slote's)

Next, MacIntyre disapproves of the utilitarianism standpoint that suggests that agents operate in a rationally detached manner. This view, however, is not in keeping with his beliefs because he claims that individuals belong to a unified communal structure, and as a result are predisposed towards cultural influences. And, finally, it is important to mention additional factors associated with MacIntyre's views that are related to moral principles. MacIntyre is of the view that objectivity can overcome moral scepticism. The word scepticism is normally used to denote doubt or disbelief, and in certain instances, it is closely linked to the concept of relativism. Indeed, moral scepticism is amenable to the notion that differences of opinion exist. Since relativism is actually 'a frame of mind reflecting a world in which no version of the truth or the supreme values of goodness or beauty enjoys the support of a power so evidently superior to any



rival powers that it may credibly claim its own superiority over alternative versions' (Zygmunt Bauman 1987: 84) and, so, relativism, in actual fact, reflects either consensus or differences of opinion with regard to a problem considered to be merely relative to a particular situation. Whether a solution to a predicament is logically right or wrong does not seem to be the issue since truth is considered to be a separate factor.

In spite of MacIntyre's position regarding a traditional lifestyle he is well aware of the far-reaching influences of modernity, and that it is impossible to represent 'the world in a single language. Understanding had to be constructed through the exploration of multiple perspectives'. (Bernstein 1985: 30) MacIntyre concedes that ideas linked to a pluralistic society are here to stay. As a result of these suppositions Neil Levy reasons that:

The very pluralism which, MacIntyre believes, threatens to undermine the rationality of our moral judgments turns out to be a necessary ingredient of the supposedly unified traditions MacIntyre wishes to vindicate. (Levy 1999: 472)

It is interesting to note a few other ideas regarding the concept of relativism and pluralism. Amongst others, Bauman states in *Legislatures and Interpreters: "On modernity, postmodernity, and intellectuals"* (1984) that for Lomie D. Kliever, relativism does not cause a problem because it should be perceived as an explication that allows for the accommodation of modernity's pluralistic social system. This point of view is expressed as follows:

Pluralism is the existence of multiple frames of reference, each with its own scheme of understanding and criteria of rationality. Pluralism is the coexistence of comparable and competing positions which are not to be reconciled. Pluralism is the



recognition that different persons and different groups quite literally dwell in irreducibly different worlds. (Bauman 1987: 129)

This position also seems to be reminiscent of Bernstein's (1983: 30) belief that one can move beyond objectivism and relativism and, ironically, according to him an advantage of the theory of relativism is its focus on "multiple perspectives" as it provides a platform for the differences found in a pluralistic culture, which is undeniably a feature of the modern ethos and societal structure.

### **3.4 Conclusion**

In this chapter we have presented MacIntyre's analysis of the state of modernity's moral decline. His arguments are presented in a coherent and thought-provoking style and it is obvious that the situation of modernity has troubled him deeply. Furthermore, he asserts that the failure of the Enlightenment Project is unavoidable mainly because of emotivism and utilitarianism, which have developed steadily as a result of the notion of individual autonomy whose moral capacity has been reduced to the supposedly inferior level of irrational preferences and emotions as the foundation of moral judgment.

As a means to overcoming the "moral malaise" (J. B. Schneewind 1983: 525) of modern culture, MacIntyre advocates a reconsideration of Aristotelian ethics, with the inclusion of a traditional lifestyle so that human beings can hopefully function once again as historical-moral-political creatures; ideas that are undeniably also central to the communalistic aspects of Aristotle's ethical-political philosophy. In the following chapter, consideration will be given to MacIntyre's attempt to rehabilitate the Aristotelian approach to society, conceptualized as a (historical) community.



## **Chapter Four**

### **Society as a community: MacIntyre's attempt to reconstruct "the rational" within modernity**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

Taking into consideration MacIntyre's critique of modernity, in the preceding chapter, it seems quite natural that he should attempt to find answers for the destabilization of moral thinking that has come to characterize the culture of modernity. In this regard, MacIntyre is particularly concerned about modernity's overemphasis on a model of rationality that absolutises an instrumental mode of thinking geared towards the achievement of "progress" of a technical-scientific nature. Given modernity's epistemological framework in which the "subject" is basically in control of the "object", in spite of various attempts to achieve a relational balance between the two poles of "subject and object", the freedom of modernity to question everything amounts in fact to the freedom of the individual to assert his or her autonomy and independence from all forms of social and moral-political solidarity; hence the development of emotivism and liberalism as the appropriate forms of human conduct within modernity

In this chapter, I will focus firstly on MacIntyre's attempt to achieve a sense of moral-political unity within the context of modernity (4.2). From this perspective, I propose to consider MacIntyre's argument that the modern philosophical theory of a free-thinking individual has resulted in legacy of "criterionless" and adaptable moral standards, potentially capable of infinite revision and change, thereby reinforcing an ethos of moral indifference with regard to the question of unity and human solidarity. In this regard, MacIntyre's attitude concerning liberalism and his noticeable preference for a communitarian-based society will be explored in order to underline MacIntyre's conception of human beings as primarily moral-political agents immersed in a social and historical web of mutual obligation, respect and cooperation.



Secondly, in an attempt to counteract the dilemmas brought about by the changing dynamics of the current social structure (both sociological and philosophical in nature) MacIntyre maintains that a likely solution to the problematic situation would be the reintroduction of the ideals embodied in the classical Greek philosophical tradition, namely, a rehabilitation of Aristotelian ethics that could possibly ensure a process that 'restores intelligibility and rationality to our moral and social attitudes and commitments', (MacIntyre 1985: 259) so that moral dignity is once more interwoven into the moral culture of modernity. MacIntyre's critical appropriation of Aristotelian ethical thinking will duly be discussed (4.3).

Thirdly, in conjunction with MacIntyre's suggestion that everything is basically historically and socially interlinked, three pertinent themes will be discussed, namely, the idea of a practices, the narrative unity of the self and, tradition as a solution to modernity's moral-political inadequacies (4.4).

## **4.2 The quest for unity**

Notwithstanding modernity's claim to universality and equality, MacIntyre claims that the Enlightenment Project's introduction of frequently unacceptable ideas has resulted in much of modern society's dysfunctional conditions. He is especially critical of the negative impact caused by the autonomous individual's perception of their lifeworld, which paved the way for many changes and differences of opinion regarding authoritative standards related to ethical ideals and daily practices. For MacIntyre, one of the most disturbing dilemmas, derived as a result of the "legacy of the Enlightenment", (Harvey 1989: 41) was the stance adopted by modernity in its conclusion that the social sciences could basically be studied or assessed in terms of the instrumental rationality of scientific thinking. For example, human functioning could be explicated in a manner similar to the workings of a mechanical object. He claims that this outlook has dehumanized the essential nature of humans with frequently



regrettable consequences. This passage below, in which Bernstein reflects on the impact of instrumental thinking on modernity, underlines MacIntyre's general concerns:

But when unmasked and understood, the legacy of the Enlightenment was the triumph of *Zweckrationalität* – purposive – instrumental rationality. This form of rationality affects and infects the entire range of social and cultural life encompassing economic structures, law, bureaucratic administration, and even the arts. The growth of *Zweckrationalität* does not lead to the concrete realization of universal freedom but to the creation of an “iron cage” of bureaucratic rationality from which there is no escape. (Bernstein 1984: 5)

Regarding MacIntyre's assertion that emotivism was a major cause in the breakdown of moral standards during the Enlightenment period, he, is actually saying that, in an emotivist environment, where the individual is largely absorbed with the “self” and subjective preferences, a variety of disturbing factors tend to emerge. The agent's inability to distinguish between personal and impersonal reasons perpetuates a social structure that creates manipulative interaction and association. This situation is rendered worse given that people also tend to neglect to recognize the distinction between the meaning and use of moral utterances and consequently, they are unable to provide rational or logical criteria either to justify a moral judgment or to provide a coherent perspective on moral questions of “right and wrong”. What is more, he maintains that emotivism is directly linked to liberalism and its absorption with the unencumbered “self”. The individual's manner of behaviour suggests that no particular reason is necessary to explicate his or her actions, thus, leaving no legitimate basis for an objective account of morality. With regard to this problem, MacIntyre is of the view that this attitude can only result in the breakdown of responsible moral actions within the context of modernity. Furthermore, he declares that a



conceptual distinction between what a situation “is” and what it “ought to be” can only be meaningfully maintained in a context where a communally shared tradition of values precedes the instruction of such a conceptual distinction, in the first place, MacIntyre’s position is that modernity’s efforts to advance a system of rules that could possibly replace or transcend traditional values (shared by particular historical communities) is doomed to failure in view of the fact that rules can be altered and, more significantly, ‘they are never sufficient to determine how we ought to act’. (MacIntyre 1999: 93) In line with this reasoning, MacIntyre argues that trust in and acceptance of the human being as a cultural and historical creature can overcome the “ghostly emotivist self”. (Mulhall and Swift 1992: 80)

Given MacIntyre’s emphasis on the historical and cultural dimensions of human existence, it is not difficult to understand why it is deemed important to establish rational principles of human conduct that transcend the devastating potential of modern individualism. Beyond the modern individual lies a tradition of time-honoured values, whose reintegration into the consciousness of modern “man” offers the possibility of overcoming the narrow conceptions of morality that currently enjoy pride of place. The values are needed, according to MacIntyre, as a necessary foundation for moral-political unity; they can potentially counteract the moral experience of vertigo in a modern world seemingly incapable (at present) of dealing with its self-imposed confusion in the wake of its radical break with tradition. What is the point of inventing and reinventing new images to make modernity look more “attractive” (as opposed to “legitimate”), when the underlying theme at the root of modernity’s inception is that the unity of the self lies in denying or rejecting the self’s moral links with the past? The transitory nature of modernity (given its obsession with the “future” as the arena of progress) makes it difficult to safeguard any understanding or to offer support for the traditional bonds of our common heritage as human beings. This situation might seem ironic since the Enlightenment era’s intention was to establish unchanging qualities (certainty), for example, by the introduction of a single



scientific method founded on reason. However, to offset the destructive effects of emotivism and liberalism on modernity, MacIntyre aims to restore an objective as well as a realistic framework in which virtues can once again function meaningfully. He argues, that these facets can be reclaimed through the inclusion of historical and traditional factors and a reinvestment in Aristotelian ethics and, at the same time he emphasizes the relevance of being attached to a communal lifestyle where a system of values can be nurtured. For MacIntyre, unity bridges the gap between what has gone before and what happens at this moment in time, therefore, a 'part cannot be understood without the whole'. (Bernstein 1983: 32) Before we can fully appreciate this aspect of MacIntyre's philosophy, however, we need to consider in some detail his assessment of the modern individual within the context of the liberal doctrine.

#### **4.2.1 MacIntyre's views on liberalism**

MacIntyre's assessment of liberalism is focussed on the moral implications of the modern philosophical conception of the self as an autonomous individual operating within a moral-political environment of entitlement. For MacIntyre, the most significant implication is the real possibility of countless controversies and moral indifference in the face of the most crucial moral challenge: a sense of solidarity that reinforces our understanding of ourselves as interdependent moral beings. Without this sense of moral interdependence, ethical thinking (within the context of modernity) amounts to nothing more than a meaningless process of argumentation with no overall context that is universally binding on the participants in various discourses on morality. According to MacIntyre, this state of affairs is irrational, and he attributes the decisionistic irrationalism of modernity to its fundamental defense of an ahistorical, that is, non-traditional approach to dealing with questions of morality, given its commitment to a progressivistic understanding of rationality and knowledge, presented in the form of scientific thinking.



MacIntyre is of the view that the liberal's attempt to found morality on principles that are committed to universal and impartial ideals of scientific thinking, can never succeed for as long as the historical and social aspects of our human-ness are ignored. According to MacIntyre, a disregard for the past can only lead to the emergence of a culture in which the destructive elements of self-determination are allowed to flourish, thereby encouraging a constant engagement in irresponsible actions that promote the "symptoms of the emotivist disease". (Mulhall and Swift 1992:77) In keeping with MacIntyre's line of reasoning, this condition is aggravated by modernity's dismissal of the past since, in principle, if there are no previous standards or acceptance of the ideas of our predecessors, on what legitimate grounds is it possible to legitimize liberalism as the best form of moral-political interaction. The rationale behind this is that, for any logical discussion to get off the ground or be justified, some previous knowledge or shared starting point is essential. Added to this dilemma is the fact that the modern individual chooses to become disengaged from participating in a communal lifestyle. According to MacIntyre, this leads to the modern individual's failure to perceive the unifying function that communities serve in reinforcing our interdependence as human beings. His position is that values are nurtured in a social setting and, hence, the denial of a person's membership of the community, as a historical and moral-political being, makes no sense, since community-participation provides the primary medium for the (moral) intersubjective development of the human being. From this perspective, MacIntyre argues that the "liberal myopia" (Mulhall and Swift 1992: 93) hampers the individual's realization of the merits of belonging. Even though for MacIntyre, the community is ontologically and morally prior to the individual, it does not necessarily follow that individual life is to be understood only as a function or mechanical expression of the belief and knowledge systems of the community. MacIntyre still wants to defend the intrinsic dignity of the individual, hence his claim that the 'self is a social product, but that [that] product is a unique person'. (Selznick 1987: 447) The child is initially initiated into a world of traditional values where his or her personality and social identity are formed; within the primary setting of



a parental group situation that can never be escaped, although it can be changed. Therefore, MacIntyre asserts that discarding the fact that humans are social creatures is to distort the importance of intersubjective interaction and mutual relationships of love, friendship, solidarity, and sympathy with others. MacIntyre holds the view that if we refuse to acknowledge that communities have a purpose by simply insisting that only liberalistic viewpoints have legitimacy in the context of modernity, we condemn moral life to an arbitrary and meaningless exchange of viewpoints as a result of which the process of moral development is sacrificed to an intellectual process of endless debate. The central importance that MacIntyre accords to the community as the primary medium of moral development is shared by Habermas who writes 'We cannot understand the character of the life-world unless we understand the social systems that shape it, and we cannot understand social systems unless we see how they arise out of activities of social agents'. (In Bernstein 1984: 22)

MacIntyre is particularly critical of the liberalistic approach that recognizes the agent's right to make any decision that an agent might deem appropriate, since individuals behave as if any form of conduct is to be commended as long as the outcome is "successful", that is, as long as the desired goal is achieved, the means is justified. In keeping with this line of thinking, no history exists and the individual feels free to create his or her own "private space" which serves as the only legitimate source of his or her (strategic) being-in-the-world. As a result, modern society is weakened by a monadic environment of unconnected selves motivated primarily by private (selfish) choices and so-called rights of entitlement. It is from this perspective that MacIntyre argues that morality is currently in a "state of crisis". Since there is no consensus of what is required for a virtuous life, the moral decisions typically made by the modern self are destructive of the possibility of a virtuous life. As MacIntyre (1979: 22) puts it, 'liberalism itself became foundationless; and since the morality of our age is liberal we have one more reason to expect the search for the foundations of ethics to be unrewarded'. In contrast to this situation, he argues that communities offer an



environment where objectivity and impartiality may be upheld as ideals deemed essential to the moral development of the individual, which ideals, in MacIntyre's view, provide the key to the development of a virtuous life. Anything less than an informed commitment to the shared ideals of objectivity and neutrality is an illusion in which freedom becomes a new form of slavery. In MacIntyre's view, it is as if, 'liberation leads to a new form of enslavement'. (Pippin 1991: 152) In this regard it seems to be the case that the conceptions of liberty and equality are misinterpreted. For instance, liberalism appears to promote random and inconsistent solutions and explanations to problems of a moral nature. MacIntyre says that these problems arise in spite of liberalism's support for the ideals of charity and fairness as the appropriate forms for the expression of the "good life". In addition, MacIntyre is critical of a liberal social structure that claims pluralism poses no problem. Liberals maintain that individuals have the right to choose their own good. A similar form of pluralism is advocated by liberal thinkers, such as, John Rawls. The undermentioned quote reflects the liberalistic outlook:

As free persons, citizens recognize one another as having the moral power to have a conception of the good. This means that they do not view themselves as inevitably [unavoidably as you might expect] tied to the pursuit of the particular conception of the good and its final ends which they espouse at any given time. Instead, as citizens, they are regarded as, in general, capable of revising and changing this conception on reasonable and rational grounds. Thus it is held to be permissible for citizens to stand apart from conceptions of the good and to survey and assess their various final ends. (Will Kymlicka 1990: 202)

But, as MacIntyre asserts, this actually presents a problem since the liberal subject is left to his or her own devices when deciding questions of right and wrong, in total disregard of the time-honoured values of the community as a source of guidance and wisdom.



In his critique of liberalism, MacIntyre declares that it is impossible to realize complete neutrality in the political arena. To be totally detached from or impartial to what is actually taking place is not feasible since it has been shown that historically, allegiance to certain prior happenings and activities ideally serves not merely members of a community, but also promotes the advancement of each citizen. Also, political as well as ethical ideas cannot be separated from local cultures since good governance and values facilitate mutual understanding and the flourishing of a civilization. MacIntyre stresses that instead of liberalism advancing a democratic standpoint it seemed this is no longer possible because people who are part of the democratic way of life are apparently more concerned with serving their own interests, therefore, political pursuits are 'instrumentally degraded and bureaucratically marginalized'. (MacIntyre 1985: 227) This has led humankind to become engrossed in technocratic procedures and indifferent to questions of value. In order to avoid this situation, MacIntyre believes that if modern society is to succeed in minimizing the destructive impact of liberalism as it finds expression in the capitalist system, on the one hand, and in a technocratic ethos in which "science" is worshipped as the neutral (value-free) discipline of progress and success, on the other hand, it needs to be grounded in principles of ethical thinking capable of producing ideas that transcend the modern individual's egoistic focus on the "self". To this end, MacIntyre turns to the ethical writings of Aristotle for inspiration.

#### **4.3 MacIntyre's debt to Aristotelian ethics**

According to MacIntyre, the general rejection of the Aristotelian system of ethics is simply another manifestation of modernity's elevation of itself as the privileged centre of reason and rationality. The most important consequence of modernity's self-definition as a self-sufficient category (in the historical as well as philosophical sense) is that the idea of history and tradition is, in principle, ruled out; hence the need for modernity constantly to reinvent itself. With the purpose of redeeming moral principles within the context of modernity, MacIntyre



advocates a return to Aristotle's philosophy, or "something very like it". (MacIntyre 1985: 118) In pursuit of this task, MacIntyre declares that it is crucial to analyze and reinterpret Aristotle's original text (and context) in such a way that we do not lose sight of Aristotle's original philosophical intent: to establish the conditions necessary for the development of a virtuous life within the Greek city-state. MacIntyre identifies two advantages in the Aristotelian approach: first and foremost, if pursued, it provides a model of ethical thinking with the potential of reversing the individualistic (and the accompanying decisionistic) elements of the modern liberal culture, secondly, it serves as an example of how to nurture respect for traditional values and practices in a social and political environment where the individual sense of self-worth, dignity and identity is sanctioned within the broader context of society as a community of interdependent and cooperative human beings.

The focal point of Aristotle's ethics is its teleological emphasis and belief in the essential nature of humans, defined as rational beings, each with the potential to reach self-fulfillment. The difficult balance between 'man-as-he-happens-to-be and man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-essential-nature' (MacIntyre 1985: 52) is at the centre of Aristotelian ethics; this transition requires practical reason in the face of concrete lived-experience. According to Aristotle, ethical thinking is of a "practical" nature and, as such it requires a "practical" form of rationality to guide the individual in his or her search for moral excellence. There is therefore a clear conceptual distinction for Aristotle between the "theoretical" reason that we normally associate with the natural sciences, on the one hand, and the "practical" reason, that we associate with the human potential for moral excellence. For Aristotle, the idea of the realization of one's moral potential as an individual is cast within the ethical context of teleological thinking in terms of which the individual is challenged to develop his or her the unique talents and capabilities in the service of the community. From this perspective, the idea of fulfilling one's potential cannot therefore be separated from the idea of serving the community: the one idea necessarily implies the other.



In his inspired work, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle sets out his views on ethical ideals that are not only applicable to everyday activities, such as, social and political matters, but which also demonstrate their universal appeal. Basically, his notions show that upholding virtues produces *eudaimonia*, (the attainment of happiness is of central concern to Aristotle) which enables humankind to become conscious of their essential nature within the context of their moral interaction with other human beings. Even though Aristotle's ethical position is primarily teleological in character, it should be noted that he does not explicitly make an unambiguous distinction between the "good for man" and "exercise of the virtues". He maintains that:

[T]he exercise of the virtues is not in this sense a means to the end of the good for man. For what constitutes the good for man is a complete human life lived at its best, and the exercise of the virtues is a necessary and central part of such a life, not a mere preparatory exercise to secure such a life. We thus cannot characterize the good for man adequately without already having made reference to the virtues. And within an Aristotelian framework the suggestion therefore that there might be some means to achieve the good for man without the exercise of the virtues makes no sense. (MacIntyre 1985: 149)(Emphasis, MacIntyre's)

These philosophical viewpoints highlight Aristotle's thoughts on what it means to be a "good man"; humans have a purpose and can move from an untutored self to a tutored self. Within this process agents are able to express themselves not merely as unique individuals but also as unique members of a communal group, where a variety of practices establish the person's identity as well as position in a particular community. MacIntyre emphasizes the point that these conditions were preserved in pre-modern society within the framework of the *polis*, whereas



in a modern society individuals, more often than not, function in isolation. Furthermore, to call something good or bad in pre-modern society meant in reality that these pronouncements have an objective validity. Traditional moral statements could be considered to be true or false, good or bad, right or wrong, in a manner that transcended the narrow interests of the self-absorbed individual.

Even though MacIntyre wishes to attain a similar situation in the modern moral environment, he does not really defend the notion of an “essential nature”, but he does seek to introduce a normative context aimed at justifying the transition from the “is” level of descriptive scientific thinking to the “ought” level of normative ethical thinking. Given this distinction, MacIntyre proceeds to consider the possibility of reintroducing the Aristotelian notion of *telos*, albeit in modified form, in the hope of overcoming the liberal idea of an ahistorical human subject (the emotivist self), thereby providing the space for a reconsidering of the self from the point of view of history and tradition. At the root of MacIntyre's ethical project is the idea of unity within the self and unity with others. This approach is strongly reminiscent of Plato's idea of justice-as-harmony, as elaborated in *The Republic*. MacIntyre does indeed acknowledge his debt to Aristotle's mentor when he points out that, for Plato, [the] ‘virtues are not merely compatible with each other, but the presence of each requires the presence of all’. (MacIntyre 1985: 142) This idea of the unity of the virtues, which is also supported by Aristotle, completely contradicts the modern conception of virtue. In this regard, MacIntyre writes:

[V]ariety and heterogeneity of human goods are such that their pursuit cannot be reconciled in any single moral order and that consequently any social order which *either* attempts such a reconciliation *or* which enforces the hegemony of one set of goods over all others is bound to turn into a straitjacket ... (MacIntyre 1985: 142)(Emphasis, MacIntyre's)



The above quote reinforces modernity's perspective, in accordance with the liberalistic viewpoint, that moral choices cannot implicitly be said to be either good or bad choices or decisions. However, this is an outlook that MacIntyre certainly is not in agreement with since, for him, separation of factual elements from an appraisal whether something is true or false is unacceptable. In MacIntyre's view, in the Homeric culture, for example, the individual accepted that every moral act was linked with a particular communal lifestyle. In other words virtues were interpreted as representing a way of conduct that enabled the person to perform his or her social functions, that is, virtues were appraised within a social framework. Furthermore, in the ancient Greek tradition, the pursuit of a virtuous life was the only path to the realisation of one's "essential nature". Given this approach, the interpretation of moral conduct can only take place within the context of the individual's participation in the *polis* (the political community) because the realisation of the "essential self" as a moral being goes hand in hand with one's contribution towards the preservation of the community, there is therefore no distinction between the individual as a "moral being", on the one hand, and a "political being" on the other hand. MacIntyre is indeed sympathetic towards the Greek conception of man; as he puts it, the 'relationship between *being a good citizen* and *being a good man* becomes central'. (MacIntyre 1985: 133)(Emphasis, MacIntyre's)

With reference to communities, it should be noted that crucial differences exist between the ancient societies and the modern liberal state. These dissimilarities are not just about the construction of society, but in the distinct differences between objectives and ideals. For example, according to Aristotle, the *polis* encompasses the "whole of life" and includes a range of standards and shared purposes to set up communities. While recognizing that conflict or disunity is indeed an inescapable dimension of human existence, Aristotle does believe that conflict for its own sake can only lead to the destruction of the community, hence the importance of the virtue of "friendship", which for him as well as Plato, is the "highest" and "noblest" form of love. When the virtue of "friendship" is cultivated



in the service and pursuit of objective ideals aimed at preserving the life (or flourishing) of the community, then we have a society in which the “good” takes us beyond the egotistical needs and ambitions of an insulated individual. According to Aristotle, communal existence should involve a common project that permits human flourishing and ordinarily incorporates a bond of friendship that provides harmony within the community. What is more, Aristotle claims that failure and conflict are caused by imperfections in a person’s personality and the way to overcome this negative situation is not merely by means of a person’s metaphysical and reflective nature, but by adopting a “practical” approach to the attainment of happiness; this “practical approach” emphasizes the person’s inseparable ties with other members of the community. Although the pursuit of virtue cannot be separated from the human desire for happiness, the medium for the attainment of happiness-as-virtue includes the social (friends and family), and the political (the preservation of life of the community as a whole). It is from this perspective that Aristotle conceives of human freedom as the freedom to pursue the good life, because the good cannot be separated from the political. This point is particularly important to MacIntyre’s position, when he writes:

What are political relationships? The relationships of free men to each other, that is the relationship between those members of a community who both rule and are ruled over. The free self is simultaneously political subject and political sovereign. Thus to be involved in political relationships entails freedom from any position that is mere subjection. Freedom is the presupposition of the exercise of the virtues and the achievement of the good. (MacIntyre 1985: 159)

In spite of MacIntyre’s admiration for Aristotle’s moral-political views, it should be pointed out that he (MacIntyre) does not support the Greek philosopher’s views on the question of “slaves and barbarians”. For Aristotle, there is a “natural” distinction between the “civilized and rational” creature of the Greek *polis*, and



those “non-Greeks” who, by implication, lack the rational capacity of the Greek citizen. This is surely the first “official” expression of philosophical racism in terms of which reason is the exclusive privilege and monopoly of a certain “race”, to the exclusion of other “races”. In this aspect of Aristotle’s thinking we find the early beginnings of a type of racist thinking that was to find resonance later in Western politics of domination and conquest of the non-Western world.

It should be pointed out that MacIntyre condemns the Aristotelian thesis that certain individuals are slaves “by nature” (MacIntyre 1985: 160), as well as the implication arising from this thesis, namely, that non-Greeks (read non-Westerners), lack the rational capacity for a virtuous life within the context of a political community. For Aristotle, the absence of a political life testifies to the absence of the “essential nature” of human-ness. It confirms that the ‘other’ (non-Greek) is not fully human – hence the justification of slavery. For Aristotle, not to belong to a community (in the Greek sense) is not to belong to “the human family”. He says that ‘a human being separated from the *polis* is thereby deprived of some of the essential attributes of a human being’. (MacIntyre 1988: 96)(Emphasis, MacIntyre’s) This is a very debatable point even though the Athenian society might define personhood in this manner it does not mean that reason can only flourish in the Greek philosophical tradition.

According to Aristotelian conception of ethics, the nature of one’s friendship with others will determine whether one eventually becomes a good or a bad person. In this regard, Aristotle claims that a good person is unable to form a bond of friendship with a bad man. Aristotle accordingly accounts for human evil in terms of human relationships, and since the “divine element” of reason resides in the soul of every human being, to act against one’s friends is to “sin” against God. As MacIntyre puts it, to rebel against ‘divine law [is to rebel against] ‘human law insofar as it is the mirror of divine law’. (MacIntyre 1985: 175) From this perspective, true friendship includes the “divine”, and MacIntyre claims, furthermore, that the ‘bond of authentic friendship is a shared allegiance to the



good'. (MacIntyre 1985: 174) It is the Aristotelian notion of friendship within the community that forms the basis of MacIntyre's attempt to overcome the destructive impact of liberalism, as the defining feature of modernity.

#### **4.4 Modern society as a community**

From the foregoing evaluation it cannot be denied that MacIntyre's opposition to liberalism and emotivism stems from a profound appreciation of the integrative potential of the communitarian approach to morality and politics. In keeping with Aristotle's basic position, MacIntyre suggests that the possibility of a communitarian approach should seriously be considered if modernity is to move beyond the devastating consequences of its reduction of rationality to the level of instrumental thinking. It is the search for a more comprehensive conception of rationality, one that includes a more comprehensive conception of moral-political life that provides the impetus for MacIntyre's critique of a scientific-technically driven society that modernity has become. MacIntyre's critique of modernity must therefore be interpreted in the light of his attempt to do for modernity, what Aristotle did for the Greek city-state, namely, provide meaningful and coherent social structures, effective economic and political institutions aimed at the pursuit of the virtuous life within the broader context of the life of the community. To this end, MacIntyre introduces the notions of "practice", the "unitary self", and "tradition", in the light of which we will now discuss his attempt to redeem modernity.

##### **4.4.1 The idea of practices**

In MacIntyre's attempt to restructure modern society, he critically appropriates the Aristotelian idea of "practice". It should be noted that the idea of "practice" presupposes an appreciation for the "historical narrative" as the medium for a meaningful integration of "tradition" into central social structures of modernity. For MacIntyre, the notion of "tradition" necessarily presupposes openness and receptivity to the wisdom of previous generations. Tradition is very relevant since it offers a concrete starting point for the cultivation of good practices, that is, the



socialization of the individual with a view to inculcating habits of social responsibility and obligations. In this regard, the priority of the community over the individual is duly acknowledged in a practical manner. According to MacIntyre, 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' (MacIntyre 1985: 59) and as a result unnecessary conflict usually follows.

In view of the fact that practices have a strong historical element, MacIntyre asserts that anybody, who wishes to participate in some practice, should also be willing to accept the authority of someone who is equipped with superior knowledge. A crucial advantage in accepting a knowledgeable instructor's advice is that this discourages any emotivist or random opinion or attitude to interfere with the correct performance of an activity. He states that the notions of internal and external facets are vital to understanding the full meaning of a practice. MacIntyre explains what he means by a "practice" as follows:

By a 'practice' I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended. (MacIntyre 1985: 187)

In addition, MacIntyre holds the view that virtues are a necessary component of practices. This comment reflects his view that '*A virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods*'. (MacIntyre 1985: 191)(Emphasis, MacIntyre's) Thus, according to MacIntyre, virtues facilitate the acquisition of



certain goods that are said to be intrinsic to practices as well as offer reasons as to why certain actions are more suitable than others. Besides, to engage in practices implies “to fill a set of roles”. (Mulhall and Swift 1992: 79) MacIntyre holds the view that a practice becomes meaningless when it can no longer be attached to a worthwhile end. As he puts it:

[U]nless there is a *telos* which transcends the limited goods of practices by constituting the good of a whole human life, the good of a human life conceived as a unity, it will *both* be the case that a certain subversive arbitrariness will invade the moral life *and* that we shall be unable to specify the context of certain virtues adequately. (MacIntyre 1985: 203)(Emphasis, MacIntyre's)

Since no single practice is capable of coping with all aspects of what is worthwhile, MacIntyre turns to examine additional ideas involved in attaining a coherent or “whole” life. Human beings cannot be judged merely by their physical activities; mental as well as spiritual elements must also be taken into account. As indicated by MacIntyre, if any understanding is to be achieved about what it means to be human, not just intentions and actions should be investigated but also the “setting of the action”. (Mulhall and Swift 1992: 86) With regard to the argument regarding the quest for a life that reaches its “full” potential, MacIntyre invokes the idea of narrative history to provide the desired point of departure for the development of a historical consciousness on the part of the “unitary” self.

#### **4.4.2 The narrative unity of the self**

How does one achieve unity? From the Aristotelian perspective, it seems to be the case that to be constantly immersed in moral tasks makes it possible for humans to become whole. Likewise, MacIntyre states that unity consists of “a narrative embodied in a single life”. (MacIntyre 1985: 218) In both assertions there is the basic contention that the self is interlinked with others and, as a



consequence, when an individual behaves in a proper manner there is always the likelihood, or perhaps hope, that similar actions can be expected of others, in spite of the fact that social circumstances might differ. MacIntyre explains this viewpoint as follows:

For I am never able to seek for the good or exercise the virtues only *qua* individual. This is partly because what it is to live the good life concretely varies from circumstance to circumstance even when it is one and the same conception of the good life and one and the same set of virtues which are being embodied in a human life. ... not just that different individuals live in different social circumstances; it is also that we all approach our own circumstances as bearers of a particular social identity. I am someone's son or daughter, ... I am a citizen of this or that city ... (MacIntyre 1985: 220)(Emphasis, MacIntyre's)

This citation is a significant aspect of MacIntyre's philosophy since he declares that this individual's concrete position in society ought to be respected, which means that the striving for moral excellence must take into account the concrete circumstances of every individual. This "taking into account of the individual's circumstance" is just another way of restating the "golden rule" as an appropriate moral basis for sympathizing or empathizing with others.

MacIntyre supports Michael Sandel's assertions that the 'unity of a virtue in someone's life is intelligible only as a characteristic of a unitary life, a life that can be conceived and evaluated as a whole'. (Sandel 1984: 126) For instance, right actions originate from being conscious of one's authentic identity, which is usually made known to others through personality characteristics and participation in certain social roles. This does not actually mean that beings need to remain in a particular position, nor does it entail acceptance of any limitations that the individual might encounter, since progress and change are always



possible. With special reference to communities, MacIntyre asserts that these structures provide an area to search for our true identity as the basis of self-esteem. Charles Taylor expresses a similar point of view in his *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*.

People may see their identity as defined partly by some moral or spiritual commitment, say as a Catholic ... . Or they may define it in part by the nation or tradition they belong to, ... . What they are saying by this is ... that this provides the frame within which they can determine where they stand on questions of what is good, or worthwhile, or admirable, or of value. (Taylor 1989: 27)

MacIntyre draws attention to the fact that pre-modern society's commitment to customary values and traditional practice provided a meaningful foundation for the development of a unified self. However, modern mankind's existence has become fragmented. The modern self claims its identity from a "self-that-decides-to-be". Factors that have contributed to this situation are, firstly, the disconnectedness and separatedness of the modern self, thus leading to loneliness and the promotion of egotistical tendencies; secondly, the dismissal of a communal culture, where unity and mutual interests are relevant, resulting in the dominance of modernity's atomistic (liberal) society; thirdly, a division between the individual and his or her social roles, resulting in a general pathology of schizophrenia. According to MacIntyre, a consistent narrative of a single life is lacking within the structures of modernity, given the latter's acceptance of an ahistorical conception of the self (disembodied and fragmentary) as the norm. In this regard, MacIntyre reminds us that 'to try to cut myself off from that past, in the individualist mode, is to deform my present relationships. The possession of an historical identity and the possession of a social identity coincide'. (In Schneewind 1982: 660) It is therefore to be expected, according to MacIntyre, that the modern self cannot even be perceived



as having the ability to realize the moral ideals implicit in the Aristotelian system of virtues.

How people relate to one another, as well as how one personally reacts to good or bad experiences, not only shapes the individual, but also enables others to form an opinion about who we are since 'our lives are enacted narratives in which we are both characters and authors; a person is a character abstracted from a history'. (Mulhall and Swift 1992: 87) Given the argument that each person has an identity it should also be noted that everyone participates in society on two levels. Firstly, individuals act out their lives as subjective entities, that is, in a private capacity and are normally considered an unknown persona and, secondly, as a public figure it is possible to recognize an individual not simply in terms of his or her unique external characteristics, but also from the point of view of his or her respect for shared understandings and vision that authenticate a particular cultural tradition. MacIntyre therefore believes that we are conditioned by previous experiences and events and that historical linkage provides unity and social identity to a single life.

In conjunction with discovering who we are, human beings ordinarily think or recognize that they have some duty towards society as well as a need to belong. To stand completely apart leaves the person with a feeling of disconnectedness and loss, a loss of what it means to be truly human. And, it is for this reason that MacIntyre maintains that individuals are dependent on communication, that is, on a public forum for debate and dialogue. Taylor also supports the "*dialogical* character" of language by claiming that '[w]e become fully human agents, capable of understanding ourselves, and hence of defining an identity, through our acquisition of rich human languages of expression'. (Andrew Jason Cohen 1999: 131) Whereas thinking or reflecting is a private attribute, languages are essentially a public means of exchanging ideas, especially those ideas that have a bearing on the human need for recognition, identity and social justice in a world that we share with others. In the public forum, true "progress" must not only



indicate “where we are going”, it must also indicate “where we come from”, hence the importance of tradition.

#### **4.4.3 Tradition as a solution to modern inadequacies**

With regard to all happenings, whether reference is made to traditions, value systems or discoveries, everything is necessarily understood or revealed within the context of a specific (concrete, historical, cultural) hermeneutic framework. Given this perspective, MacIntyre states that we all ‘inherit a variety of debts, rightful expectations, and obligations from our families, cities, and nations, and that these inheritances constitute the moral particularity of our lives, which he refers to as our “moral starting point”.’ (Michael Kelly 1989-90: 70) Traditions do not merely imply a set of customs and beliefs that members of a society share throughout a considerable period of time that naturally ‘extend beyond the cognitive sphere to embody actual forms of life and reflect this wider material background’ (Tate 1998: 25), but also provide the individual with a concrete background to discover who they are, as a subjective being as well as a social being. With reference to the aforesaid, MacIntyre claims that:

A living tradition then is an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition. Within a tradition the pursuit of goods extends through generations, sometimes through many generations. Hence the individual’s search for his or her good is generally and characteristically conducted within a context defined by those traditions of which the individual’s life is a part, and this is true both of those goods which are internal to practices and of the goods of a single life. (MacIntyre 1985: 222)

While MacIntyre recognizes the accomplishment of the natural sciences, he maintains that modernity’s failure has further been reinforced by its breaking away from traditional values. He maintains that people need to concede that a



historical frame of reference undoubtedly plays a significant part in each life. Tradition allows human beings to become mindful of their legacy (and hence identity), and in the process of self-discovery become empowered to act meaningfully, and with conviction. From this perspective, unity of the self begins with the forging of a historical link between the individual's life and that of the community at large. It is in this regard that MacIntyre stresses the importance of storytelling as the most effective means of developing a moral-historical consciousness. Instead of the dull, didactic and abstract moral treatises that invariably prove to be ineffective, MacIntyre recommends the art of storytelling for the moral development of the modern "self", since, 'man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal'. (MacIntyre 1985: 216)

Finally, it should be noted that for MacIntyre, the notions of "tradition" and "reason" are not mutually exclusive. He defends the view that 'it is traditions which are the bearers of reason'. (Bernstein 1983: 77) From this perspective, rational arguments are "tradition-bound", that is, they have their origins in a cultural tradition, and the critical evaluation of the "traditional" perspective, at the level of practical discourse, can only take place with due regard for the historical context of its emergence within the community. Without the experiences and information of the past it is difficult, if not impossible, to substantiate an argument or understand certain events and be in a position to provide rational justification for a particular course of action or decision. MacIntyre therefore rejects the argument that liberalism is not a tradition. As he puts it, 'modern liberalism, born of antagonism to all tradition, has transformed itself gradually into what is now clearly recognizable even by some of its adherents as one more tradition'. (MacIntyre 1988: 10) Therefore, liberalism 'has constituted itself as a tradition precisely by creating its own normativity out of itself'. (Kelly 1990: 71)



#### **4.5 Conclusion**

MacIntyre's contributions to the contemporary "liberal-versus-communitarian" debate are indeed invaluable. Of primary importance, for MacIntyre, are the distinct approaches adopted by both social structures. Despite his belief in individual autonomy and freedom of expressions, he is critical of liberalism's determined effort to focus mainly on the "self" that has resulted in an emotivistic outlook. From his appraisal of communitarianism it is obvious that he is in agreement with their aims to foster communities where humankind's ethical legacy is upheld so that the degeneration of moral values and social relationships may be prevented.

In pre-modern times, civilizations endeavoured to create a social and political environment of unity within society by their persistence in upholding moral principles, the significance of which was believed to transcend the narrow sphere of individual self-interest, the primary source of social conflict. However, in contrast to this situation, MacIntyre claims that modernity has lost the notion of unity and therefore its moral foundation. And, it is for this very reason that MacIntyre tries to transform and rehabilitate modern thinking by integrating Aristotle's ideals that guide one towards a common good. The main objective of this is to assist humans to try and rediscover their ultimate nature. This MacIntyre believes can be best achieved by involvement in long-established and shared practices within a communal setting. As regards the relevance of the Aristotelian ethical system to the modern way of life, it has frequently been argued that Aristotle's views on the "good life", as well as his account of moral customs and social unity are rather naïve and simplistic. However, despite the reservations that contemporary thinkers may have about the possibility of its application within the context of modernity in this regard, it should be pointed out that MacIntyre is not looking for a wholesale importation of Aristotelian thinking; he is aware that this is impossible and that modernity's historical consciousness is radically different, but this should not blind us to the fact that we are essentially creatures of history.



Although MacIntyre presents cogent arguments regarding the deterioration of moral standards during modernity and his belief that morality can be redeemed within a traditional environment, he nevertheless fails to provide rational foundations for his defense of modernity as a product of history. The question that needs to be asked is whether reason, as the defining characteristic of modernity can provide a rational defense of its historical consciousness within the conceptual framework of modernity. We will address this question in Chapter Five.



## **Chapter Five**

### **An alternative approach to the question of modernity**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

In Chapter Four, I discussed MacIntyre's proposal to resolve modernity's moral dilemmas from the perspective of his critical appropriation of the Aristotelian system of ethics, with a view to developing his own ethical ideas of practices, unity of the self, and tradition. He highlighted that a communal way is a necessary and sufficient condition for the development of a virtuous life. MacIntyre's critique of the Enlightenment Project has duly been noted, especially his views on the privileging of science, as the only legitimate model of rationality, knowledge, and truth. MacIntyre is of the opinion that if the model of instrumental-scientific is absolutised to the disregard of other (equally legitimate) forms of knowledge and understanding, the historical-moral dimensions of human existence will inevitably lose their significance, thus reducing ethical thinking to an instrumental rationality aimed at the egotistical and strategic pursuit of individual self-interest. Modernity's rejection of its historical heritage, the belief that (scientific) reason is the sole means of acquiring knowledge, the view that the scientific method can be applied indiscriminately to both the natural and human-social sciences, as well as its uncritical acceptance of liberalism as the only legitimate form of moral-political interaction, have all been discussed, not so much with a view to declaring MacIntyre an enemy of modernity, but rather to underline my basic argument, namely, that MacIntyre's critique of modernity forms part of a larger ambition: to overcome the destructive elements that currently doom modernity to failure. To this end, MacIntyre has sought to rehabilitate the philosophical idea of "tradition", as the historical medium for modern "man's" rational development as a moral-political being. The question I seek to address in this regard is whether MacIntyre does in fact succeed in overcoming the problems generated by modernity's overemphasis on a model of technical-scientific rationality, in other words, I seek to establish whether it is



possible to be critical of science without falling victim to the charge of irrationalism. Is science the only legitimate model of human rationality?

In order to address these questions, I will briefly consider the views of Jürgen Habermas with a view to presenting a more comprehensive understanding of modernity. Of crucial importance to me is his attempt to broaden our understanding of reason, by emphasizing the dialogical-communicative dimensions of human existence as the medium of reason in society. For Habermas, communication on all levels is crucial to understanding and correctly interpreting the “lifeworld” (or various forms of social interaction). By including the views of Habermas, I hope to contribute to a more balanced approach to an understanding of modernity. In this regard, I will proceed as follows:

- Diverse views on the subject of modernity’s status (5.2)
- Habermas’s attitude towards modernity (5.2.1)
- Discourse as an alternative approach to understanding modernity (5.3)

## **5.2 Diverse views on the subject of modernity’s status**

MacIntyre’s attitude toward the question of morality and his conviction that the Enlightenment Project had failed, has contributed extensively to an extremely important philosophical debate on the nature and true significance of modernity, involving some of the most important thinkers of our day, including Habermas. In this regard, MacIntyre’s own critical evaluation of modernity has covered a wide variety of subjects, including ethics, history, and politics. MacIntyre’s major contribution to this debate is the view that modernity has promised more than it can deliver insofar as it has failed to provide a rational justification for its faith in (scientific) reason as the only reliable standard of progress, knowledge and truth. It is this failure, according to MacIntyre, that has led to the profound moral uncertainty, so characteristic of modernity. According to him, this condition of moral uncertainty has become extremely problematic given modern society’s



failure to provide a common frame of reference for dealing with matters that are ethically challenging, such as abortion, the just war, to mention but a few examples. According to MacIntyre, the malaise within contemporary ethical thinking is especially evident when one considers that the subjects of modernity are not even capable of agreeing on the most basic terminology when they enter into debate on various moral issues. The individual is left to his or her own devices, at it were; he or she becomes a law unto himself or herself. The self-legislating autonomous (rational) moral agent of Kantian ethics, who ought to be governed by the “moral law” in terms of which other human beings are treated as ends, rather than a means to an end, has degenerated into a self-absorbed individual, incapable of respecting the other person as a fellow human being. This state of affairs points to a profound crisis at the root of modernity’s self-interpretation; the possible redemption of modernity lies in its ability to produce thinkers with the ‘moral resources that transcend the immediate crisis, which enable them to say to the culture what the culture cannot ... say to itself’. (MacIntyre 1979: 16)

There are opposing viewpoints in respect of modernity’s strengths and weakness. There are those who claim, as Habermas does, that modernity remains an “unfinished project” (Tate 1997: 295) since its objectives have not yet been realized. Habermas’s position on this enterprise will be discussed in a later section (point 5.2.1). As a result of these differences in outlook, a variety of approaches have been introduced to make sense of what has been taking place in recent times. These methods reveal a continuing search to find solutions to the endless problems created not only by the Enlightenment Project. Gadamer’s “method” of philosophical hermeneutic, for example, is aimed at achieving understanding through interpretation and application within many practical situations. Another example is Habermas’s thesis of intersubjectivity, which has sought to encourage unity and interaction among individuals through communication and dialogue and in the process be receptive to what is really happening in our lifeworld. Consequently, it seems appropriate to regard the



contemporary epoch as an introduction to realizing the significance of the consciousness of discourse, as opposed to “rule” theories. The reason for this is that prominent thinkers utilize open discourse to get in touch with the numerous complexities of existence. Therefore, whether agreement is reached or not, the continuing exchange of ideas indeed illustrates that changes are occurring. Furthermore, dialogue brings greater awareness and understanding to all cultural groups so that consensus might be arrived at as a result of the new (dialogical) consciousness as a redemptive theme in the shared project of trying to come to terms with modernity. It should be kept in mind that many philosophers, as well as men and women of literature during the Enlightenment era, were unsympathetic towards many of the new doctrines since they have claimed that many aspects of transformation within modernity have caused unnecessary conflict and suffering. In this regard, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, for example, claim in their joint publication, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1972), that the ‘suspicion lurks that the Enlightenment project was doomed to turn against itself and transform the quest for human emancipation into a system of universal oppression in the name of human liberation’. (Harvey 1989: 13) Whilst being highly appreciative of the significance of the condemnation of modernity articulated by the earlier generation of thinkers associated with the “School of Frankfurt”, Habermas, however, defends the view that modernity can still be salvaged.

Modernity has also come under fire from representatives of “postmodern thinkers”, such as Richard Rorty (1980), J.F. Lyotard (1984), Michel Foucault (1970), and Jacques Derrida (1976). Even though the postmodernists seem to agree with the modernist rejection of past traditional practices, they question the modernist assumption of philosophical universalism implicit in the model of scientific rationality. In place of scientific rationality, the postmodern thinkers have sought to introduce a mode of “aesthetic thinking” aimed at overcoming the structures of domination and oppression that has accompanied the development of the Enlightenment Project. At the root of the postmodernist critique is a total



rejection of reason as the appropriate means of emancipation (from domination) and freedom. This is why “art” is celebrated in the postmodern form of critique; it is believed that “art” will succeed where “reason” has failed. The postmodernists’ aesthetic response stems from an underlying disenchantment with modernity’s failure to fulfill its promise of radical social transformation in the name of (an enlightened and an enlightening) reason. On the subject of reason as a means of acquiring all knowledge, it is interesting to note that the postmodernists warn against too much preoccupation with instrumental reasoning as they argue that it is reason within modernity that has been (and continues to be) the condition of the possibility of human suffering, as witnessed for instance at Auschwitz. (Adorno 1973: 361-408) Moreover, they maintain that instrumental reasoning should be replaced by a more authentic expression of freedom which, alas, can only be achieved, according to postmodern thinking, in the realm of “free play”, the realm of the “imagination”, that ultimately takes the form of engaged “writing” against all forms of “terror” that have found expression in the “totalitarian” forms of ideology in which “science” has been privileged as the centre of rationality, progress and truth. According to Lyotard:

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have given us as much terror as we can take. We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one, for the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, of the transparent and communicable experience. Under the general demand for slackening and appeasement, we can hear the muttering of the desire for a return to terror, for the realization of the fantasy to seize reality. The answer is: Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name. (Lyotard 1984: 82)

A direct consequence of Lyotard’s critique of modernity is the celebration of “difference” in and through “language” other than the hegemonic “language of



science". The "other" language has its origins in the cultural life of the community. Whilst modernism sought to identify with the single language (of science), postmodernism aims at the protection of the "lifeworld", defined as the expression of pluralism and difference. For a postmodern thinker such as Derrida, the critique of modernity takes the form of a "deconstruction" of the metaphysical tradition of modern philosophy, in view of overcoming, if at all possible, the oppositional form of thinking that privileged the "familiar" at the expense of the "unfamiliar" in an effort to legitimate the domination of the "other". (Derrida 1982: 109-136) Furthermore, the technique of critical analysis of language and text stresses the importance of the relational qualities, but more importantly, it stresses the oppressive structural elements inherent in the Enlightenment Project where the language of science is viewed as the paradigmatic expression of reason. Against the hegemonic discourse of scientific rationality, the language of the community somehow rings "more true" given its spontaneity and authenticity; it "roots" within the community. Within the community, languages actually seem to take on a life of their own, hence, enabling novel ways of interactive communication and expression, which merge with a traditional reservoir of language use, the combined effect of which is the knowledge of the community's self-conscious freedom to define itself and to authenticate its existence on its own terms. Despite the postmodern thinkers' emphasis on "other languages" as the condition of the possibility of freedom, Habermas however, even though he shares their view on the emancipatory potential of the "linguistic turn" in contemporary philosophical thinking, does not believe that the postmodern approach can deliver on its promise of freedom. According to Habermas, postmodernism is a form of "false consciousness", of "pseudo-radicalism" which, is the latest articulation of conservatism, given its inability to effect "real" change in the "real" world. (Habermas 1981: 13-14) For Habermas the problem of modernity is not an overemphasis on reason, but rather a deficit of reason in view of modernity's leveling of reason to the domain of scientific-technical thinking. (Habermas 1985: 192-216) We now proceed to



discuss more fully the philosophical nature of Habermas's views on the question of modernity.

### **5.2.1 Habermas's attitude towards modernity**

In contrast to MacIntyre's claim that irreconcilable ethical disagreements have contributed significantly to the failure of modernity, Habermas's outlook represents a more positive approach as he alleges that these very arguments and counterarguments actually illustrate the controversial nature of the "philosophical discourses of modernity". (Tate 1997: 285) John W. Tate basically defends a similar position when he asserts that modernity is a 'process of critical evaluation and justification and conceives of modernity less as an objective historical period than as a normative process with prescriptive ends or goals'. (Tate 1997: 307) In addition, an interesting distinction between MacIntyre's and Habermas's attitude regarding the Enlightenment's conception of reason is observed. While MacIntyre argues that knowledge cannot be solely founded on reason, Habermas is of the opinion that the reasoning process passes through a number of stages and can be validated in "normative terms" and so encompass a foundation for its legitimacy. As a result of this standpoint, upholding the Enlightenment aspirations for advancement, based on reason, is vital for 'critical independence and [the] capacity of (communicative) reason'. (Tate 1997: 304)

Similar opinions held by both MacIntyre and Habermas come to the fore in their respective objections to issues, such as, increased specialization in the workplace, which has resulted in a form of management control that normally isolates the individual from the end product. They also agree on the failure of modernity to distinguish between practical and technical facets; they believe that no culture, even though it is scientifically orientated can be exempted from practical philosophy without causing difficulties. This view implies that if 'no attempt is made to attain a rational consensus on the part of citizens concerning the practical control of their destiny, its place is taken by the attempt to attain technical control over history by perfecting the administration of society, an



attempt that is just as impractical as it is unhistorical'. (Bernstein 1983: 43) A further distinction between MacIntyre and Habermas is their outlook concerning emotivism. According to MacIntyre, this theory was a primary contributing factor in the moral crisis of our times, and has led to the failure of the Enlightenment enterprise. However, it is worthy to note that, even though Habermas is not supportive of emotivism as such, he maintains that it too can contribute something to a more in-depth understanding on how individuals reason.

Entrenched in the Enlightenment's reasoning is the fact that, if an investigation is unlikely to be founded on universal standards and fixed criteria, then there is no logical rationale that enables a person either to assert that something is superior or question whether something is "true". On the other hand, MacIntyre argues that since it is known that everyone does make comparative judgements and also that without mutual principles and shared activities, understanding would not be possible; modern society ought to be constructed along guidelines that reflect this basic understanding. It is vital, therefore, to remember that no era of history is so different that an appraisal cannot be made, since people do, to some extent, share a common frame of reference; for instance, the custom of saying prayers can surely be understood by others.

It is interesting to note that while Habermas is aware that a variety of negative political and economic experiences have their origin in the process of modernization, he is nonetheless more accepting of modernity's current challenges and pathologies than MacIntyre. Habermas contends that there is a mode of evaluation and interpretation of the enterprise of modernization that moves beyond criticism towards understanding through open dialogue.

It seems to be the case that Habermas's position regarding the Enlightenment enterprise can perhaps best be described as a novel perspective because, despite his recognition of the "dark side of the Enlightenment legacy", (Bernstein 1984: 31) he still offers modernity the real possibility of redemption. In this



regard, Bernstein points out that '[t]he project of modernity, the hope of Enlightenment thinkers, is not a bitter illusion, not a naïve ideology that turns into violence and terror, but a practical task which has not yet been realized and which can still orient and guide our actions'. (Bernstein 1984: 31) Regardless of the fact that he is aware that logical positivism, emotivism, and the triumph of instrumental reason all have their origins in the systematic ambiguities of the Enlightenment Project, Bernstein recognizes, in support of Habermas, that we need to preserve the truth implicit in this enterprise and reconstruct its emancipatory potential and quest for knowledge and justice. He (Habermas) proposes to achieve this through dialogue since he maintains that:

For it is only in and through dialogue that one can achieve self-understanding. If dialogue is not to be an empty impotent ideal, then a transformation and reconstruction of the social institutions and practices in which dialogic communication is embedded becomes a practical imperative. (In Bernstein 1984: 12)

Within this setting, for Habermas, modernity is indeed a project that has not yet been realized. It is not simply a time of sociological transformation, emancipation and a break from prior historical times but also a venture that assists humankind in becoming more enlightened. Due to the relentless nature and changing circumstances of modernity, however, there exists the never-ending challenge for modernity to redeem itself and establish an environment that could perhaps provide unifying standards. From this perspective Tate (1997: 295) claims that it is possible to comprehend why Habermas perceives that modernity is an "unfinished project" since he 'continues the Enlightenment focus on a normative conception of reason as the source of emancipation and reform, in contrast to a conception of reason as an instrumental mode of rationalization and control'. (Tate 1997: 295)



With reference as to how people tend to explain a situation, however, it is interesting to note that past experiences are normally invoked as a normative context for the justification and explanation of present actions and decisions. Therefore, based on the fact that individuals find it necessary and frequently significant to give some form of explanation or justification it is observed that it is “natural” to ground arguments or discussions on past experiences, thoughts or events within a specific setting. This in itself is an indication, as maintained by MacIntyre, that not only are historical factors intertwined with social practices, but also that a frame of reference is a necessary feature of any form of interaction, and as a consequence, it is illogical that modernity completely excludes the past. From another angle, Habermas reasons that the contemporary period should be regarded as ‘the break brought about with the past as a *continuous renewal*’. (Tate 1997: 287)(Emphasis, Tate’s) This observation obviously indicates that a proviso should be in place that generates an environment that facilitates constant rethinking about changing factors that are clearly very important to progress.

According to Bernstein, the reason why Habermas’s research has become so significant with regard to recent discussions on modernity is that ‘he addresses himself to what many of us still believe, or want to believe: that it is possible to confront honestly the challenges, critiques, the unmasking of illusions; to work through these, and still responsibly reconstruct an informed comprehensive perspective on modernity and its pathologies’. (Bernstein 1984: 25) A unique characteristic of modernity is that it is always in a state of “becoming” its own legitimacy, that is, modernity has constantly to reinvent itself since everything is open to review and investigation, in view of the fact that it is not reliant on former suppositions – or so it is claimed. Habermas seems to support the latter claim when he writes:

Modernity can and will no longer borrow the criteria by which it takes its orientation from the models supplied by another epoch; *it has to create its normativity out of itself*. Modernity sees itself cast



back upon itself without any possibility of escape. (Habermas 1987: 7)(Emphasis, Habermas's)

The passage above seems to suggest the possibility that modernity can legitimate and justify its validity strictly on its own terms. This may well be the central claim of the modernist agenda, but is it possible to do so? Habermas seems to be saying “yes and no”, which may be interpreted as a moment of indecisiveness on the part of Habermas. More to the point, however, is the fact that Habermas is making allowances for the historical dimensions of human existence within the paradigm of modernity. This stance makes it possible for Habermas to redeem or validate morality within a context what is deemed to be a “modern setting” while, at the same time, advocating a process of remembrance or recollection of the historical events that have had a decisive impact on the development of modern society. Habermas's commitment to modernity must therefore take into account the decisive experiences of our collective historical consciousness, which, in his case, would certainly be the so-called “German question”. (Wolin 1989: ix) Historical denialism and revisionism have certainly played their part in trying to soften the reality of the “German question”; for Habermas, however, it is important that the supporters of Nazism “come to terms with the past”, that is, to acknowledge (openly and honestly) what really happened in Nazi Germany. Implicit in this acknowledgement is the hope of transcending the socio-political conditions that made “Auschwitz possible”. Richard Wolin (ibid.) addresses this aspect of Habermas's thought as follows:

For the development of a healthy, nonpathological identity would seem contingent on the forthright acknowledgement of those aspects of the German tradition that facilitated the catastrophe of 1933-1945. And this is why recent efforts on the part of certain German historians – bolstered by an era of conservative stabilization – to circumvent the problem of “coming to terms with the past” are so disturbing. (Wolin 1989: ix)



As can be seen above, Habermas's theory of history commits him to a "practical", that is, moral-political engagement aimed at overcoming problems of domination, oppression and genocide. History is not something that is "handed down" to the next generation in a pure or unmediated form; its interpretation depends very much on how we see the present and the future. If we can foresee a future free from racial discrimination, cultural domination, economic exploitation, gender violence – to mention but a few problems – the moral-political inspiration for such a future originates within the tragedy and pain of our past. For Habermas, history is never completely innocent since it serves as a continual reminder of where we have "gone wrong". It is the non-acknowledgement of where we have "gone wrong" that reemerges in the form of the "pathology of modernity". In this regard, Habermas informs us that his 'problem is a theory of modernity, a theory of the pathology of modernity, from the viewpoint of the realization – the deformed realization – of reason in history'. (In Bernstein 1985: 4) If we disregard our moral-political ("practical") engagement with the past, history takes on the "innocent" form of a positivistic account of "the facts" ("historicism"), with a view to normalizing the present, with no regard for the future. Normalizing the present usually takes the form of "letting bygones be bygones"; it works against the spirit of (mutual) understanding, and the past is reduced to a matter of (my) opinion. If I choose to deny the holocaust, then my opinion should be respected. Modernity is, after all, the age of freedom of expression.

Habermas draws on the model of philosophical hermeneutics, in order to overcome the problem of "historicism – its own hidden form of positivism". (Bernstein 1984: 10) As indicated above, Habermas is critical of the researcher, who holds the view that it is possible to interpret an event, yet, simultaneously suspend (bracket) our judgment and evaluation of certain historical events. According to Habermas this is not satisfactory since to understand and interpret some situation it is significant to 'rationally evaluate the validity claims that are made by participants'. (Bernstein 1984: 10) Within this context it is important to



know what motivates the “other” to engage in some actions and not in others because this usually is part of the data and therefore allows for a more comprehensive mode of inquiry and understanding. For Habermas, the process of understanding the “other” is a rational process. It presupposes the possibility of reason (in history) as the condition of the possibility of dialogue-aimed-at-reaching-understanding. In spite of the pessimistic views regarding the Enlightenment Project and sceptical views about reason, Habermas remains optimistic. He asserts that modernity’s dilemmas can be rationally resolved through practical tasks and fostering “communicative rationality”. He points out that reason has “a stubbornly transcending power, because it is renewed with each act of unconstrained understanding, with each moment of living together in solidarity, of successful individuation, and of saving emancipation.” (Bernstein 1984: 25)

According to Habermas, reason must not, however, be interpreted in the foundationalist terms of the modern metaphysical tradition, where absolute foundations of certainty (Descartes), or the *a priori* conditions of the possibility of knowledge (Kant), are assumed epistemologically to precede the question of truth. For Habermas, the question of knowledge and truth necessarily takes the form of the uncertain (the fallibilistic), of the hypothetical, and the idea of the “fallible” is especially applicable to questions of moral truth within the consciousness of the community. As Bernstein explains, ‘[i]n the centrality of the idea of a fallibilistic critical community, and in the probing of the dynamics of intersubjectivity, he discovered the kernel of what he was to later call “communicative action” – action oriented to mutual understanding’. (Bernstein 1984: 3) For Habermas, ‘[r]eason, freedom, and justice were not only theoretical issues to be explored, but practical tasks to be achieved – practical tasks that demanded passionate commitment’. (Bernstein 1984: 2)



### **5.3 Discourse as an alternative approach to understanding modernity**

Communication is the key to mutual understanding. It is from this perspective that Habermas tries to develop a rational model of intersubjective communication (dialogue) aimed at reaching understanding with others. The intersubjective model of dialogue presupposes the exchange of ideas between, at least, two individuals eager to understand each other. The possibility of reaching understanding implies the moral imperative of acknowledging the “other” as an equal partner-in-dialogue. The human process of reaching understanding, which Habermas attempts to formulate in his theory of “communicative action”, must be distinguished from the more “strategic” form of communication, which is but a means of achieving a particular extrinsic goal. The strategic form of communication, although the most popular (because it is particularly effective in a modern world geared towards personal – individualistic-ambition and personal goals) is, for Habermas, a secondary form of communication. It has, however been elevated to the primary form of communication, given modernity’s emphasis on the instrumental form of rationality, the domain of science and technology. It is this overemphasis on the instrumental form of rationality, which Habermas identifies as the major cause of the “pathology of modernity” (In Bernstein 1984: 4); it destroys the “practical” form of rationality, which is the realm of moral and political coordination and human solidarity. Habermas writes:

But, of course, the real difficulty in the relation of theory to practice does not arise from the new function of science as a technological force, but rather with the fact that we are no longer able to distinguish between practical and technical power. Yet even a civilization that has been rendered scientific is not granted dispensation from practical questions; therefore a particular danger arises when the process of scientification transgresses the limit of technical questions, without departing from the level of reflection confined to the technological horizon. For then no attempt at all is made to attain a rational consensus on the part of citizens



concerning the practical control of their destiny. Its place is taken by the attempt to attain technical control over history by perfecting the administration of society, an attempt that is just as impractical as it is unhistorical. (Habermas 1974:255)

According to Habermas, all “practical” questions are geared towards reaching understanding with the others. This process of reaching understanding is, for Habermas, the primary form of communication. For as long as modernity continues to privilege the “strategic” form of communication, its pathology will continue to undermine the very thing that makes human moral-political coexistence possible, meaningful and non-pathological, namely, human understanding. For Habermas, the process of understanding starts at the birth of the individual, and carries on right up to the moment of death. For as long as we allow the process of understanding to be devalued and neglected within the context of modernity, the full potential of modernity as a product of human rationality, will never be realized.

It is to Habermas’s credit that he recognizes a universal potential for rationality in humankind’s “natural” capacity for speech. It is the capacity for communication that enables humankind to lay claim to the rational, and it is the historical nature of human existence that leads Habermas to speak of “reason in history”. (Bernstein 1985: 4) Habermas is of the view that all conversation aimed at reaching understanding, draws implicitly on a range of claims whose validity may either be accepted or questioned by those involved in a particular conversation or debate. If accepted, then the “normal” everyday life of everyday certainty continues in its “normal” routine, predictable and “certain” way. If rejected, mutual understanding is temporarily suspended until valid reasons, capable of convincing the dialogue-partners, have been found. The general acceptance of valid reasons will restore consensus, and the “normal” will resume its customary role in our everyday lives. If, however, all the familiar, conventional patterns of explanation and validation fail, the process of communication can either break



down completely, or move to a higher level of “discourse”, where the dialogue partners are acutely aware that they are entering a realm of the hypothetical, where uncertainty is not necessarily interpreted as a sign of ignorance or stupidity, but rather a sign of our human fallibility as human beings in the face of certain questions, which have lost their familiar consensual context of justification. From the perspective of discourse, Habermas distinguishes between the “active” and the “reflective” dimensions of human existence. Whereas the active has to do with the familiar world that we tend to take for granted, the reflective “transcends” the world of action, when the latter can no longer provide justifiable “reasons to act”. It should be noted that Habermas is not referring here to a mystical realm “outside and beyond” the reach of ordinary thought; he is certainly not trying to rehabilitate the Platonic allegory of the cave, although the Platonic distinction between “mere opinion” and “true knowledge” must certainly have been at the back of his mind. What Habermas is more concerned with, however, when he speaks of discourse, is the more “mundane” idea that reason, upon realizing the inadequacies and limitations of certain arguments, is potentially capable of reflecting upon itself, and of transcending its own conceptual products. Habermas explains the importance of “discourse” as follows:

Discourse helps test the truth claims of opinions (and norms) which the speakers no longer take for granted. In discourse, the “force” of the argument is the only permissible compulsion, whereas cooperative search for truth is the only permissible motive. Because of their communicative structure, discourses do not compel the participants to act. Nor do they accommodate processes whereby information can be acquired. They are purged of action and experience. The relation between discourses and information is one where the latter is fed into the former. The output of discourses ... consists in recognition or rejection of



problematic truth claims. Discourses produce nothing but arguments. (In Bernstein 1976: 110)

Habermas accordingly distinguish between the realm of communicative action, aimed at mutual understanding, on the one hand, and discourse, which is an open-ended process of thinking, where the truth claims of the world of communicative action have been problematised and questioned. In both cases it is the rational that presupposes the possibility of continued dialogue. Habermas claims that communicative action is essential to understanding and interpretation on all levels through intersubjective meaning, which is created by the use of language among individuals. An abstract concept, such as, happiness is not only an attribute but describes feelings and reactions that is part of what is implied by saying that this person is in a certain frame of mind. Hence, interpretation and understanding are mutually agreed upon from the observation of similar paradigms of interactions. In addition, communicative action normally takes into account moral and practical responsibility of an agent that includes acceptable standard practices as well as rational actions that are logically true and consistent with empirical knowledge.

Taking into account the structure of modernity's rationale, Habermas argues that validity claims are involved in communicative action as a means to reach understanding about diverse interpretations. Interpretation is absolutely essential to discover the complexities of meaning in which actions and utterances have a function in concrete situations. Since attention is focussed on the conversation of all participants, issues related to the conditioning and motivation of both the subject and inquirer's lifeworld should be part of the investigation. Moreover, valid norms are morally obligatory because of the relationship between the interaction of society and members during communicative action. Habermas argues that this guideline originates from an exchange of ideas in a practical manner. The crucial role that validity claims play in Habermas's thinking is reaffirmed when he claims that:



Validity claims ... they transcend any local context; at the same time, they have to be raised here and now and be de facto recognized. ... The transcendental moment of *universal* validity burst every provinciality asunder; the obligatory moment of accepted validity claims renders them carriers of *context-bound* everyday practice. ... a moment of *unconditionality* is built into *factual* processes of mutual understanding – the validity laid claim to is distinguished from the social currency of a de facto established practice and yet serves as the foundation of an existing consensus. (Habermas 1990: xvii)(Emphasis, Habermas's)

Unlike MacIntyre, for whom modernity is “doomed to failure”, for Habermas, modernity has yet to fulfill its potential. For Habermas, modernity has to be understood in terms of three fundamental forms of rationality: they are “cognitive-instrumental” (the scientific), “morality-practical” (the moral-political), and “aesthetic-expressive” (aesthetic). (Habermas 1981: 8) It is when we fail to keep these three, fundamentally distinct forms of rationality, separate that we fall into simplistic evaluations of modernity, where we absolutise one of the three at the expense of the other two, thereby disturbing the “balance” of modernity’s rational potential, by leveling modernity to only one of its dimensions. Advocating a broader conception of reason, one in which science does not have the monopoly lies at the root of Habermas’s interest in modernity. He refers to the modern obsession with science as a form of “logocentrism”, where the “object” of knowledge overshadows the knowledge-seeking “subject”. Habermas’s conception of rationality seeks to take us beyond the “subject-object” model of rationality that forms the basis of “scientific thinking”. With regard to the critique of the logocentric leveling of modernity, Habermas writes:

Western logocentrism [is taken] as an indication of the exhaustion of our philosophical discourse and a reason to bid adieu to



philosophy as such. This way of reading the tradition can not be maintained if philosophy can be transformed so as to enable it to cope with the entire spectrum of aspects of rationality – and with the historical fate of a reason that has been arrested again and again, ideologically misused and distorted, but that also stubbornly raises its voice in every inconspicuous act of successful communication. Such a transformation is possible only if philosophy does not remain fixated on the natural sciences. (In Bernstein 1985: 197)

In distinguishing between the three different forms of reason, Habermas is in fact following Kant's differentiation between the "theoretical reason", "practical reason", and the faculty of "judgment". As Habermas (1990: 18) puts it, Kant 'separates the faculties of practical reason and of judgment from that of theoretical knowledge, and he places each of them on its own foundation'. (Habermas 1990: 18) It is in terms of Kant's conceptual differentiation that Habermas therefore pleads for the redemption of modernity in terms of a more comprehensive development of the modern subject. Beyond the world of science, which is a world in which everything (nature and human beings) has been reduced to the level of an object lies "more reason". For as long as we continue to associate reason exclusively with science, as MacIntyre and the postmodern thinkers do, we will willy-nilly condemn the human being to suffer as a helpless victim in a modern world whose freedom has turned out to be a never-ending nightmare of domination and exploitation – the inevitable products of logocentric thinking. Habermas, (ibid.) asserts, "logocentrism means neglecting the complexity of reason effectively operating in the life-world, and restricting reason to its cognitive-instrumental dimension (a dimension, which we might add has been noticeably privileged and selectively utilized in processes of capitalist modernization".



Habermas's interpretation of modernity as an "unfinished project" certainly takes into account the historical dimensions of the modern subject. In this regard, he has something in common with MacIntyre. Unlike MacIntyre, however, he does not believe that we can turn our back on modernity, not even for the sake of a thought experiment aimed at making looking back nostalgically at a pre-modern Aristotelian Greek city-state as a model of social, moral and political solidarity and coordination. In the final analysis, it is not the reflection on tradition alone that will make modernity overcome its pathology, but a commitment to a future society that we can "rationally" and freely commit ourselves to in the spirit of cooperation and mutual understanding as equal partners. Like the postmodern thinkers, such as Lyotard, Habermas fears the nightmare of political domination, terror and violence, as evoked in the moral symbolism that we have come to associate with Auschwitz. This does not mean that he will retreat into the relative security of aesthetic "free play", where the imagination is allowed to break all the rules, while leaving the "real world" relatively untouched. Beyond the loss of credibility towards "metanarratives" (Lyotard, 1984: xxiv-xxv), aimed at ensuring universal support for our collective ideals, Habermas proposes the notion of a "postmetaphysical" conception of reason in history, where the ideals that we pursue collectively are not so much the stuff that can be converted into reality, but rather the normative context for evaluating our progress and development in the "present". It is in this sense that Habermas speaks of modernity as the "here and now", the transitory, as the inescapable arena of freedom and enlightenment.

## **5.4 Conclusion**

What is particularly unique about human interaction and communication, as a result of modern thinking, is the emergence of the phenomenon of common discourse, where non-verbal and verbal actions are translated into understanding, along with the recognition that practical and moral activities are essential to a meaningful form of social life. It is through participation in shared dialogue that opportunities are revealed, that a lifeworld of unlimited possibilities



exist, where self-expression and transformation are able to take place at every stage of human development as people regularly explore unknown realms, so as to meet cultural challenges as well as extend their awareness about reality and discover truth and so overcome the usual limiting perspectives. This, of course, also reinforces MacIntyre's notion that our background, history and our intentions shape the human condition. Therefore, from the examination of the aforementioned philosophers, it can be undeniably stated that, despite their differences, there is a parallel theme throughout their writings, namely, an endeavour to promote general transparency and intelligibility as people interrelate and communicate with each other. And, most important is the view that there is no single approach to gain knowledge either in the natural or the human sciences. Despite the controversies surrounding modernity's self-definition, it is significant to bear in mind that every participant's contributions towards genuine discussion about whether modernity is successful or not, should be understood and interpreted as a step towards further enlightenment that undoubtedly might enable future generations to survive in a more meaningful manner. And, in pursuing Habermas's alternative approach, it certainly seems that this is possible.



## **Chapter 6**

### **Summary and Conclusion**

#### **6.1 Introduction**

A fundamental feature that distinguishes modernity from other historical times is its persistent and deliberate choice to reject the past. As a cultural-historical phenomenon, modernity has been preoccupied with trying to define the parameters of its self-understanding, especially in view of the tremendous impact of major events such as, amongst others, the Industrial and French Revolutions. Modernity's self-understanding is rooted in a radical self-consciousness of a new age, a new beginning, based on its radical departure from the traditions of the past.

This new beginning has certainly introduced an element of profound uncertainty into the "project of modernity" in view of the general acceptance that the past has lost its moral significance, and the present has yet to define its moral orientation. In response to the need for spiritual guidance and certainty in the present, modernity has elevated "reason" to the spiritual status once accorded to "God" in pre-modern, traditional society. According to the modern outlook, reason (as the highest authority) must provide spiritual guidance in human affairs in a society in which science is seen as the paradigmatic expression of knowledge and progress. Liberated from the authority of tradition, the individual may now proclaim "his" autonomy and independence as the legislator of the "universal" principles of human understanding.

Never before has the autonomous individual played such a central and powerful role in human society. For MacIntyre, however, the project of modernity has brought about serious predicaments since moral principles are either nonexistent, or solutions to moral dilemmas are arbitrarily decided upon, given the central importance accorded by modernity to the emotivist doctrine of ethics.



In this chapter, I will present a general summary and a few concluding remarks on a debate whose main arguments have proved to be, at once, elusive, difficult, obscure, challenging, but certainly impossible to dismiss as philosophically inconsequential.

## **6.2 Summaries**

For the purpose of understanding MacIntyre's critique of modernity it is essential to be familiar with the background from which this epoch has emerged. As I have shown in Chapter Two, the Scientific Revolution is generally regarded as confirmation of reason's alleged triumph over superstition, prejudice and ignorance – the standard obstacle to knowledge and progress. The privileging of reason, its elevation to the status of the "highest authority" is the distinguishing mark of modernity's self-definition. From this perspective, the application of reason to the human affairs of politics and morality has presupposed that reason can provide the ultimate justification for accepting science as the only legitimate source of rationality and truth in a world that can no longer "turn back". Modernity is therefore committed to a world of "change", and change becomes the "highest" virtue of "modern man".

Prominent figures, such as, Descartes, Newton and Kant have contributed significantly to the development of this new reasoning consciousness. Whilst acknowledging the relevance of reason and its accomplishments in the natural sciences, it is well-known that MacIntyre has been critical of a general application of a mechanistic methodology to all forms of human reasoning. For MacIntyre, a distinctive shortcoming of modernity is its central focus and privileging of an instrumental form of rationality. In spite of the fact that Newton's revolutionary scientific theories have contributed extensively to a scientific methodological approach, this does not mean that the "human spirit" can be captured within the mechanistic model of scientific thinking. MacIntyre argues that it is the interpretation of human beings as "instruments" and isolated "agents" in the context of modernity that has promoted the disintegration of morality, thereby



contributing to the increasing dehumanization of modern society. That the scientific community has viewed human beings in this manner might seem rather ironic when one remembers that the Enlightenment Project's noble aspirations are supposedly meant to find expression in humanistic ideals. With reference to Descartes's aim, his approach is indicative of a philosophical attempt to arrive at "absolute certainty" as the foundation of the type of "true" knowledge assumed to be capable of banishing all superstition, prejudice and ignorance, once and forever, from human consciousness. Descartes method of doubt, aimed at overcoming all doubt, bears witness to the optimistic spirit of modernity as the privileged centre of rational enlightenment and progress. The modern philosopher's supreme challenge and greatest responsibility lie in providing a philosophical foundation for accepting the scientific-technical-mathematical as the only legitimate path to knowledge.

As far as Kant is concerned, it should be recognized that he not only plays a very central role in establishing the principles of that era, but that he also went further and brought about new options into philosophical thinking as demonstrated by his conception of pure reason. In his "critical philosophy", he tries to capture the *a priori* principles of human reason in his attempt to demonstrate that all knowledge starts with a process of reasoning which, although dependent on sense experience for the content of its knowledge, must look to reason itself for the ultimate principles that will enable us, not only to have knowledge, but also to understand the "universal" conditions for the possibility of knowledge. It is the self-conscious application of these "universal" conditions of knowledge that elevates "rational man" above "his" dependence on all illegitimate forms of authority, including the authority of the past. Kant's call for enlightenment implies that modern "man" must overcome "his" immature dependence on the "false gods" of pre-modern (read pre-rational) society. As in the case of Descartes's philosophy, Kant's philosophy is also an attempt to legitimate modernity's supposed independence from the traditions of the past.



As a result of the modern philosopher's claim of intellectual independence, the modern world is a place of challenge and dread. On the one hand, it is filled with infinite possibilities; on the other hand, it is characterized by unforeseen conflict and uncertainty. The aftermath of the Cartesian-Kantian approach has been the absolutisation of "scientific" reason. A question that is repeatedly asked is whether humanity can depend exclusively on the laws of scientific reasoning to find solutions to all its moral dilemmas? Can science offer a moral reason for taking a particular stance? For example, despite the progress of scientific methods, can science actually provide ethical justification for engaging in genetic engineering?

In spite of the new dilemmas that have originated during the so-called enlightened epoch, and the resultant precariousness of the modern individual, modernity is 'unified by the common belief that reason [can] transcend contingency to establish universal "truths" and thus guarantee progress'. (Tate 1998: 9) Kant supports this statement when he says that 'reason must subject itself to constant self-criticism, so as to determine the limits of its own authority and thereby provide the basis of its own legitimacy'. (Tate 1998: 9-10) Modernity is characterized by its progressive nature that is focussed on the future as the temporal horizon of its unrealized possibilities. As a consequence of this state of affairs, modernity's task is to "*create its normativity*" from its own sources. (Habermas 1987: 7)(Emphasis, Habermas's)

It is paradoxical that the modernity, whose basic objective is to attain certainty, should nevertheless be preoccupied so extensively with radical change on account of its dismissal of former times. In this regard, it must be concluded that the only certainty is that uncertainty (change) is an integral aspect of humankind's lifeworld. Therefore, armed with a new consciousness, embraced by enlightened thinking, individuals need not be opposed to or fearful of change or uncertainty as these phenomena merely mean, on the positive side, that unlimited possibilities exist.



MacIntyre's critical analysis of modernity is presented in a thought-provoking style and it is apparent that he is deeply concerned about the absence of what he takes to be a worthwhile life. A very important aspect of MacIntyre's thinking is his steadfast belief that the Enlightenment era has in fact failed, and that its failure was unavoidable once the individuals of modernity have discarded their "essential human nature or function" (Kitchen 1997: 81), that is, their potential to realize their *telos* as human beings, filled with a sense of dignity, meaning and purpose. For MacIntyre, modernity's dissociation from its historical past has also deprived it of the benefit of the wisdom of past, which still has a lot of relevance for "modern man" in "his" quest for meaning. It is in response to the deficit of meaning in modern life that MacIntyre has attempted to establish a rational foundation for moral and political truth so that modern society may function as a meaningful and coherent "whole".

Although I refer throughout this thesis to MacIntyre's views on the moral pathology of modernity, his critical appraisal of modernity is specifically stated in Chapter Three. A major aspect of his objections is related to the theory of emotivism. He declares that this theory has contributed decisively to the failure of the Enlightenment Project. The gist of MacIntyre's critique of the emotivist approach is that personal preferences have become the sole basis of the process of decision making, and judging whether some action or perspective is acceptable or not very often depends on arbitrary and subjectivistic interpretations. The (modern) theories of utilitarianism and relativism are, for MacIntyre, philosophical expressions of the arbitrary and subjectivistic nature of modern ethical thinking.

With the aim of rehabilitating society's moral thinking and counteracting the shortcomings of modern culture, MacIntyre has set out, as shown in Chapter Four, to demonstrate that an Aristotelian type of ethics is required to rediscover



modernity's moral potential for the good life. According to MacIntyre, the value of the Aristotelian ethical tradition lies in the importance that it attaches to a communal way of life. MacIntyre would like to see a similar cohesive social pattern informing the modern cultural tradition. MacIntyre's critique of the modern theory of liberalism must therefore be seen as an extension and critical appropriation of his appreciation for the communitarian basis of the Aristotelian ethical system of thought. In this regard, he expresses his disapproval of liberalism as he asserts that our "liberal democratic rulers" (Kitchen 1997: 72) have in actual fact promoted the loss of values by replacing values with a rule-organized culture, and by placing excessive emphasis on material rewards. As far as the liberal tradition's conception of freedom is concerned, it is important to understand that whilst freedom does give one a sense of independence, freedom devoid of a sense of respect for the "other" as a human being is meaningless.

MacIntyre contends furthermore that, in order for a social structure to be secure, general respect for traditional values and customs are very important. He argues that modernity ought to acknowledge its debt to the past especially in view of the fact that 'we cannot escape our historicity, our social identities, nor the traditions which inform our lives – including the tradition of the Enlightenment'. (Bernstein 1986: 40) It should be pointed out, however, that MacIntyre's call for a general acknowledgement of our debt to the past must not be interpreted as an invitation to devalue the "here and now"; as far as he is concerned modernity is a reality and there is no escaping it. The challenge for MacIntyre is to show how to reconcile the idea of tradition with the idea of modernity when, to all intents and purposes the respective ideas of modernity and tradition are by definition incompatible. The challenge lies, furthermore, in accepting the priority accorded to the power of reason as the defining feature of the paradigm of modernity. In this regard, I have tried to illustrate that MacIntyre's tendency to equate reason with the scientific-instrumental form of thinking, results in his inability to recognize and develop reason's potential to bring about the moral regeneration of modernity. It is only when scientific thinking is given the monopoly on the scope,



status and validity of human rationality that I might accept MacIntyre's position that modernity is doomed to failure. It is precisely my disagreement with MacIntyre on this point that I have sought to present an alternative evaluation of the ("incomplete") project of modernity, as exemplified in the work of Habermas (Chapter Five).

In my view, Habermas's theory of communication, and the normative implications of his ideas concerning dialogue and discourse, certainly offers a powerful alternative to MacIntyre's interpretation of modernity. For Habermas, our capacity for speech is the most basic and most significant indication of human reason. Reason has its origin in the communicative potential of all human beings. When realized, the development of reason into the abstract language of scientific discourse constitutes, for Habermas, just one aspect of human reason. Equally important should be the development of reason in the domain of ethical thinking. Since the objectives and character of the two types of thinking are radically different, Habermas accordingly distinguishes between "theoretical" and "practical" reason, as two forms of thinking that have their roots in the "pre-scientific" mode of ordinary (everyday) thinking, that is, the lifeworld where the past really matters to the people who live in the present, and who are destined to die sometime in the future. Preceding the individuals' moments of life and death, is the historical life of the community, defined as an inexhaustible source of wisdom as we negotiate our way towards a future that really matters, because it makes sense to us – as autonomous (rational) human beings.

### **6.3 Final Conclusion**

MacIntyre's philosophy is based on the evaluation of ethical theories that are operative within the modern context and which also reflect past achievements. He examines a broad spectrum of subjects in order to demonstrate his philosophical beliefs that human lives are constantly affected by diverse events, especially those of a historical and cultural nature. There are a number of options that he tries to explore in the hope of finding a solution for the prevalent



incoherent scenario that he claims modern life has turned out to be. In this regard, he reflects critically on the epistemic status of traditional norms and values with a view to generating a coherent sense of the “self and society”, based on principles of human dignity and respect. Although, initially it might appear that MacIntyre wishes to return to the past, this is not really the case, since his primary objective is to reclaim a good life within contemporary society. MacIntyre certainly holds the view that social stability depends on our willingness to be guided by the past. He defends this point of view by claiming that within groups that are less exposed to the modern way of life, it seems that these communities are more stable and more harmoniously integrated. According to MacIntyre, these “traditional” communities hold the key to our survival within modernity, because without the “good life”, that is, human solidarity in the present, we do not have much of a future.

Although it can be argued that to revert to traditional practices is not a viable option, it must be appreciated that modern society currently does require solutions for its moral dilemmas. On a more positive note, regarding MacIntyre, it can be stated that his approach, as important as it is, should not be allowed to cloud our judgment on the practical possibility of modernity’s promise of a “better life”. Taking into consideration, MacIntyre’s opinion that modernity has failed to provide moral direction, we would do well to remember Habermas’s words that modernity must not be written off, but should rather be viewed as an “incomplete project”. The importance that we attach to the ideal of harmony, when combined with the need for justice, implies that conflict will remain a constant feature of human society. In our common quest for the “good life”, we would do well to heed Bernstein’s words:

The problem today is how we can live with the conflict and tension between the “truth” implicit in the tradition of the virtues and the “truth” of the Enlightenment. ... This is the deepest problem with



which we must live *after virtue*. (Bernstein 1986a: 140)(Emphasis, Bernstein's)



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