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On the Possibility of Secular Morality

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by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

Is something like a transcendent God necessary to have a coherent moral system, or at the very least, necessary for one to have personal ethical guidelines to live by that are not entirely subjective? This paper explores the claims of two Christian thinkers, David Bentley Hart and D. C. Schindler, as well as some alternatives to their thinking in the ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre and Jeffrey Stout. Hart and Schindler portray society as downcast, riddled with moral decay, and the only solution to this decay is to turn toward God, thereby recognizing a hierarchical, cosmological worldview. While MacIntyre believes that morality is universal in nature, held in place by a divine link, his thinking serves as a contrast to Hart and Schindler, since he allows that ethics can be grounded in specific practices, fully equipped with their own standards and norms. By contrast, Stout does not allow metaphysics to enter the discussion concerning morality, as he does not believe metaphysics are necessary for moral deliberation and development. For Stout, moral objectivity stems from the individuals who assert various claims, and insofar as their claims are not overturned by doubt, then these claims are objective. Likewise, objective morality for Stout is relative in nature, but it does not fall into the category of relativism more broadly, as he does maintain the existence of cross-cultural truths that could apply to all people. This paper offers alternative views, one in the form of ethics with metaphysics, and one in the form of ethics without metaphysics, and it does not provide a conclusive termination to the discussion concerning the grounding of morality.

CHAPTER ONE: CHRIST OR NOTHING

Christianity, as a world religion, has been losing adherents in the West in recent times, yet the concept of a monotheistic God, as outlined by the Abrahamic faiths, is believed to supply the grounding for an objective morality when coupled with a cosmological worldview. As an individual navigates space and time, he is faced with a plethora of decisions, many of which are indifferent to morality, but the question remains: "What grounds moral statements?" The Christian camp will likely arm themselves with an answer that involves the existence of God, and by extension, Christ, the Son of God. In short, God is understood as the anchor for one's moral thinking from the Christian perspective, but this perspective is not the only one which is viable.

At the outset, it will prove helpful to engage with the rhetoric of David Bentley Hart, since this individual posits a quintessential moral dilemma that binds this project together: Should one accept the existence of God, and allow that He grounds all of morality, or should one foster a different framework for morality, and thereby allow the possibility of a secular morality, not dependent upon a divine being? As a preliminary definition, I take "secular morality" to mean a moral system that is internally coherent without the invocation of God or some other divine force. Some thinkers are adamant that such a system is impossible.

David Bentley Hart, in his lecture, *Christ and Nothing*, explained that the current state of the world is at best amoral, but more to the point, the world is immoral. He asserted that, "the only choice that remains for children of post-Christian culture is not whom to serve, but

whether to serve Him whom Christ has revealed or to serve nothing- the nothing."[1] Throughout Hart's lecture, he implies that while serving Christ, an individual will be able to ground all of morality. In distinction, if one fails to adhere to the cosmological worldview of Christianity, one has no grounds for moral judgement. Therefore, one will serve nothingness, a term that gets equivocated with oneself, as living one's life only in service of oneself is apparently the fate one takes on in the absence of God. However, before we can begin an investigation to analyze this claim, we should, at the very least, outline Hart's system of belief so that we may discover the extent to which his thoughts are coherent, and if they are, whether they must be adopted as a requirement for moral judgement.

In Hart's discussion of Christ, he explained that in polytheistic religions, the relationship between the gods and Man, "was naturally a fixed hierarchy of social power, atop which stood the gods, a little lower kings and nobles, and at the bottom slaves."[2] Accordingly, humanity was not necessarily divine, and Man was at the bottom of the hierarchy; the gods ruled over the world in their anthropomorphic state. The gods engaged in various acts of debauchery, eating and drinking, and performing various other acts that could be considered definitionally human. Therefore, even if Man was considered divine, divinity in this context was synonymous with human life itself, so the term yielded no special status in the cosmos.

Further, since the gods of the Greeks were anthropomorphic, Hart tells us that the gods needed Man, and the relationship between humanity and the gods was to some degree,

[1] Hart, David Bentley. "Christ and Nothing: David Bentley Hart." *First Things*, 1 Oct. 2003, www.firstthings.com/article/2003/10/christ-and-nothing.

[2] Hart, David Bentley. "Christ and Nothing: David Bentley Hart." *First Things*, 1 Oct. 2003, www.firstthings.com/article/2003/10/christ-and-nothing.

mutually beneficial, even though Man was at the bottom of the cosmological hierarchy. Greek worship of the gods did yield favor from them, but the gods primarily dispensed their favor to individuals for the sole purpose of continuing to be worshipped; the gods too, were self-interested. Christianity, on the other hand, in its worldview, does not involve an economy of worship of the same kind. God, understood Christianly, does not need us, and Man is not at the bottom of a divine hierarchy, since Man partakes in the divine to a much greater degree. Christ bears witness to this new hierarchy, and acts as a benefactor for humanity, communicating divinity itself to the everyday man.

Christ, by all accounts, can be understood as God's representative here on Earth, and one may characterize Christ as something akin to a slave. Hart notes that, from a pagan perspective, Christ would have appeared to be, "a deranged peasant."[3] It's no secret that Christ often spoke of a world to come, all the while wearing the clothing of an impoverished man, with little finances backing him. As Jesus was before Pilate, Pilate was confronted by someone who appeared to be a nobody, as Jesus was, "beaten, robed in purple, crowned with thorns, [all the while] insanely invoking an otherworldly kingdom of some esoteric truth, unaware...of his absurdity."[4] Christ, shortly after, was crucified, and clung to his beliefs in his time of dying, and through death itself. If Jesus is understood as the Son of God, possessing the essence of God, and if his death is understood as serving some higher telos, then Jesus' death provides the outline of a sacrifice, not entirely dissimilar to the economics of Greek religious worship. However, Hart

[3] Hart, David Bentley. "Christ and Nothing: David Bentley Hart." *First Things*, 1 Oct. 2003, www.firstthings.com/article/2003/10/christ-and-nothing.

[4] Hart, David Bentley. "Christ and Nothing: David Bentley Hart." *First Things*, 1 Oct. 2003, www.firstthings.com/article/2003/10/christ-and-nothing.

reminds us that, "Israel's God requires nothing."[5] Thus, Jesus could not have died for God's sake, but for ours, especially if we understand Christ's death as the death of God Himself. The crucifixion of Jesus then, must point toward a symbolical order, one that reminds Man that he partakes in the divine, as Christian theology, according to Hart, teaches that, "the world was God's creature in the most radically ontological sense."[6] The world, according to this ontology, indicates a radically different framework in comparison with a secular worldview.

The human being, via the death of Christ, experiences a radically new existence, one which entails a divine essence, characterized by reason and moral understanding. Christ's life serves as an example of how one should live, while God the Father presents the metaphysics required to support a system of morality, since God is universal and possesses no limits. Thus, by allowing the grounding of morality to shift from the human person to the divine realm, Christianity can assert possession of a universal truth which indicates the ultimate right to claim in specificity, "one ought to do x," while never really appealing to ideas outside of God. After the death of Christ, the world is readily known as, "God's creature."[7] Any attempt to provide a rational argument for morality without invoking the presence of God, will on this account, necessarily fail, because everything is under the dominion of God, and when, "modern philosophy established itself anew as a discipline autonomous from theology, it did so naturally

[5] Hart, David Bentley. "Christ and Nothing: David Bentley Hart." *First Things*, 1 Oct. 2003, www.firstthings.com/article/2003/10/christ-and-nothing.

[6] Hart, David Bentley. "Christ and Nothing: David Bentley Hart." First Things, 1 Oct. 2003, www.firstthings.com/article/2003/10/christ-and-nothing.

[7] Hart, David Bentley. "Christ and Nothing: David Bentley Hart." *First Things*, 1 Oct. 2003, www.firstthings.com/article/2003/10/christ-and-nothing.

by falling back upon an ever more abyssal subjectivity."[8] Without God, morality falls to the wayside, and those attempting to salvage it, do so only subjectively. Thus, the charge of subjectivity must be properly dealt with; however, at this moment it would be fruitful to explore what exactly counts as objective reality according to some individuals within a Christian framework, since the charge against secular moral philosophy is the notion that philosophers leave out either a part of reality, or the whole of reality in their attempts at crafting moral systems.

Reality, at first glance, is simply that which is real. However, D.C. Schindler is a contemporary Catholic thinker who posits that there are forces behind everyday life that we do not always readily perceive. Likewise, he asserts that reality is conveyed in primarily two ways: symbolically and diabolically. I will explore both forms of communication in the remainder of this chapter, as well as Jeffrey Stout's response to the claims of Hart and Schindler.

To understand the symbolic order, one must first have an understanding of symbols. A symbol is something many of us are already familiar with. A symbol is an object which alludes to another existence outside of itself while simultaneously containing the idea of the other. Schindler notes that, "a symbol makes present a meaning that cannot be simply translated into other terms."[9] One may take the cross as purposed in Christianity as a well-known symbol; on one hand, the cross is merely that, a simple shape, but on the other hand, it represents an entirely new reality. This new reality necessarily involves God and his Son, two beings which

[8] Hart, David Bentley. "Christ and Nothing: David Bentley Hart." *First Things*, 1 Oct. 2003, www.firstthings.com/article/2003/10/christ-and-nothing.

[9] Schindler, D. C. "Symbolical Order and Diabolical Subversion." *Freedom from Reality: The Diabolical Character of Modern Liberty*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN, 2019, p. 153.

suggest a certain moral way of living. Further, if one claims that information in the world is primarily communicated symbolically, one may be prone to claiming that, "friendship found between persons is a recapitulation, a completing expression, of the basic meaning of reality."[10]

In a world where things are communicated symbolically, every item in existence represents the whole in which it is a part. In the case of a friendship, two people represent a coming together, a combining of one to another, a relationship which can be understood in even broader terms to represent the joining of an individual person to God's presence. In a Christian setting, each act of love from one party to another captures God's will for humanity, but friendship under a secular paradigm represents only the qualities pertaining to the individuals involved, as there is no immediate need to invoke a divine presence when interacting with others. Nevertheless, Schindler insists that everything is a manifestation of God's world, and this raises the question: Why do so many people fail to accept this version of reality as reality itself? According to Schindler, if an individual fails to acknowledge God's existence and his moral requirements, then the individual in question must be under the influence of the demonic, i.e., diabolical metaphysics. However, while Schindler's worldview exists here in outline, it should be noted that there is not a substantial argument to back his claims, as they rely on a reader's preexisting theological disposition.

Diabolical metaphysics can be readily understood in relation to the symbolic. Where the symbolical order seeks to join people together, ultimately to God, the diabolical seeks to dissolve binding relationships. The individual, in the diabolical scheme, takes priority over

[10] Schindler, D. C. "Symbolical Order and Diabolical Subversion." *Freedom from Reality: The Diabolical Character of Modern Liberty*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN, 2019, p. 155.

others, as the rules of morality appear to have changed, since they no longer refer to God, but are instead self-referential. The diabolical scheme replaces the symbols which point to God and the necessary relationships one is supposed to form considering God's existence, and then it puts a "deceptive image"[11] in the place of symbols and relationships with others. Schindler claims that the diabolical, "points in two directions at the very same time: to what it derives parasitically from and to itself as the reality."[12] In other words, the diabolical seeks to replace the symbolical.

By contrast, the symbolical order always maintains awareness of God's world, and each thing in the cosmos maintains its place in a hierarchy with God at the top and Man below. A reinvention of this hierarchy would fail because the original state is always required to produce anything new. In relation to morality, if an individual fails to realize what the true scope of the cosmos is, then one will fail to understand one's place in the true ontological order. Therefore, to some degree, one will struggle to become a proper moral agent. However, it is not clear why the claims of Hart and Schindler should hold any weight with an individual outside of their Christian framework.

In his work, *Democracy and Tradition*, Jeffrey Stout discusses the dichotomous nature of certain Christian thinkers. The simple notion behind Stout's work, is the idea that, "if the God of the philosophers is dead, not everything is permitted."[13] Others, however, are not

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[11] Schindler, D. C. "Symbolical Order and Diabolical Subversion." *Freedom from Reality: The Diabolical Character of Modern Liberty*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN, 2019, p. 158.

[12] Schindler, D. C. "Symbolical Order and Diabolical Subversion." *Freedom from Reality: The Diabolical Character of Modern Liberty*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN, 2019, p. 159.

[13] Stout, Jeffrey. "Ethics Without Metaphysics." *Democracy and Tradition*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 2004, p. 268.

convinced of this. Like Hart, many individuals are inclined to take an all or nothing approach when it comes to a foundation for morality, and this approach has led many thinkers to ground their moral systems in the Bible. Yet, it is unclear as to why this would grant someone solid ground concerning moral discourse. Given the various modalities of Christianity, all fully equipped with their own interpretation of the Holy text, even engaging in an inter-faith conversation with the hope of having a, "reasoned discussion to forge consensus on questions of biblical interpretation,"[14] will prove difficult. Considering this difficulty of interpretation that exists among Christians themselves, it is likely that discussions which involve Biblical appeals between Christians and the non-religious are even less successful.

If an interlocuter does not recognize scripture as a legitimate reason for a particular claim, then the interlocuter will likely not be convinced of any claims involving an appeal to scripture, but it is worth noting that a Christian can be justified in their beliefs without being able to justify them to someone outside of their belief system. Still, to the degree that one is unable to justify their position to another, they become isolated from public discourse, and if the individual is certain that, "he or she had been guided by the Spirit toward infallibly correct conclusions,"[15] then they are isolated more so because they cannot thoroughly communicate their position to another. Further, insofar as one is genuinely convinced of one's position without challenging its internal coherence, one is isolated, and this isolation serves as a prerequisite to an "us versus them" mentality, a mentality which often involves the negation of another person's rationality, insofar as the person in question fails to concede the speaker's point of view. Indeed,

[14] Stout, Jeffrey. "Secularization and Resentment." *Democracy and Tradition*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 2004, p. 94.

[15] Stout, Jeffrey. "Secularization and Resentment." *Democracy and Tradition*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 2004, p. 95.

the lack of agreement between the religious and secular leads certain Christians to believe that their interlocuter, "must have been guided by some force other than the Spirit, most likely a demonic one."[16] We have seen this exact situation play out in Schindler's discussion of diabolical metaphysics, which would have one believe that an entire class of individuals- those outside of a Christian framework- is deceived about the truth of reality, but this position is unphilosophical, and it seems that Hart and Schindler have not seriously contended with what a, "social theory of moral objectivity"[17] could look like.

According to Stout, what is true of modern life is that individuals cannot assume religious views hold weight, since there are many non-religious individuals in our society. Many people will not automatically lend credence to theological positions, and so it is imprudent to refer to them in public discourse that involves a diverse population. It is likely that individuals like Hart and Schindler have isolated themselves from a democratic discussion concerning morality by expecting, "a single theological perspective to be shared by all of their interlocuters."[18] Others, in addition to Hart and Schindler, also paint secularization in a negative light. For instance, Alasdair MacIntyre's discussion of emotivism in *After Virtue* paints the individual of modernity and plurality as being tarnished, a shadow of his former self, although there is still hope for people.

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[16] Stout, Jeffrey. "Secularization and Resentment." *Democracy and Tradition*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 2004, p. 95.

[17] Stout, Jeffrey. "Ethics as a Social Practice." *Democracy and Tradition*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 2004, p. 274.

[18] Stout, Jeffrey. "Secularization and Resentment." *Democracy and Tradition*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 2004, p. 97

CHAPTER 2: EXPRESSIVISM

In its most basic form, moral discourse seeks to move discussion from what simply is to what should be the case. There is a distinct movement from purely descriptive language to evaluative language; value necessarily enters the dynamic. Value in relation to morality, in one instance, can be understood not as what is personally valuable, such as a personal keepsake, but rather what is truthful and aimed at some good, not understood in purely functional terms. In another instance, it should be noted that something valuable can be different from what is moral, since something valuable is not necessarily moral, as the word "moral" points to something different, perhaps a subset of the valuable.

The notion of morality has been historically clouded by ambiguity, and as of present, morality still appears to be a perplexing topic. The taxing nature of moral discourse is perhaps best captured by the philosophy of emotivism, as, according to Alasdair MacIntyre, "emotivism is the doctrine that all evaluative judgements and more specifically all moral judgements are nothing but expressions of preference…attitude or feeling."[19] By this definition, it is as if the expressivists have given up on the pursuit of truth. Nevertheless, to maintain the language of contemporary literature, emotivism will primarily be referred to as "expressivism" from here on out, and this shift in language does not generate major difficulty, since

[19] MacIntyre, Alasdair C. "The Nature of Moral Disagreement Today and the Claims of Emotivism." *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN, 2012, p. 12.

"expressivism in its earlier and less philosophically sophisticated forms was known as emotivism."[20]

At first glance, expressivism appears to be a lazy way of interacting with moral language, since it effectively obliterates all moral language. Instead of being able to claim something is right or wrong, based on a set of requirements that would then conform to the definition of right or wrong, absolute whim is introduced. In his work, *After Virtue*, MacIntyre, while delivering the expressivist position, claims that, "moral judgments…are neither true nor false."[21] In this philosophical scheme, it is nearly impossible to engage in any argument involving the invocation of morals, since, at the outset, expressivism has established a principle which states that moral judgements cannot have a truth nor false value. Accordingly, it is not possible to tell another person what they *really* ought to do, because the words one will utter will not pertain to anything observable or measurable beyond one's own subjectivity. Likewise, expressivism as such, hardly reaches the benchmark of normative moral discourse, let alone philosophical discourse. MacIntyre, for one, believes expressivism collapses under the weight of its own system. I will now provide a brief recap of expressivism that will set the stage for MacIntyre's explanation for the failure of this ethical theory.

In the first instance, it is fruitful to recall that morals can denote something different from the merely valuable; the two criterions, moral and valuable, are of two different kinds. In relation to expressivism, one falls into difficulty when one actively offers approval of a

[20] MacIntyre, Alasdair. "Chapter 1: Desires, Goods, and 'Good'- Some Philosophical Issues." *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, Camrbidge University Press, 2016, p. 17.

[21] MacIntyre, Alasdair C. "The Nature of Moral Disagreement Today and the Claims of Emotivism." *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN, 2012, p. 12.

particular action because approval exists only in terms of valuation, never in terms of morality. If one approves of a particular action, the rationale behind that approval remains in a state separate from morality, a state which is simultaneously separate from possible intercourse concerning what a person ought to do, per what is moral. For instance, according to the expressivist theory of morality, if an individual approves of walking, this approval is likely grounded in reasoning which fails to involve the invocation of morality. One's health and other functional yields that prove beneficial to one's life may be invoked, but not the moral as a category of action. Expressivists would have us believe that, "factual judgements are true or false,"[22] and as far as this statement is concerned, it is without error. The statement does, however, highlight the notion that we can only have meaningful discourse about factual judgements in instances where a person can be right or wrong about something, but for an expressivist, factual statements never involve morality since a moral statement cannot be proven true nor false.

MacIntyre helps illustrate the difference between the words "approval" and "moral" by noting that the expressivists fail to denote, "the type of approval expressed by a specifically moral judgement,"[23] so the expressivist collapses all approvals into one category, the category of mere preference. However, if one follows this rationale to its logical conclusion, one can very lazily negate expressivism by simply uttering the words, "I disapprove of this," since there are no objective grounds to employ as a mediation. If we allow this as a possibility, we

[22] MacIntyre, Alasdair C. "The Nature of Moral Disagreement Today and the Claims of Emotivism." *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN, 2012, p. 12.

[23] MacIntyre, Alasdair C. "The Nature of Moral Disagreement Today and the Claims of Emotivism." *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN, 2012, p. 13.

have effectively agreed that moral language does not exist. Expressivism requires us to believe that all moral utterances find their equivalence in an individual, "expressing his feelings or attitudes and attempting to influence the feelings and attitudes of others."[24] Therefore, if a particular individual feels like approving of something one minute, but changes his mind in the next, the thing in question is both moral and immoral, depending on the time, since the exact status of an action is always determined purely by the whims of an individual at any given time. If moral philosophy is to have any meaning at all, it must be something other than this. But, if morality, commonly understood as a set of rules grounded in an objective manner, is gone, then how do we currently inform ourselves in relation to how we ought to act?

According to MacIntyre, the answer rests within expressivism, which for him, necessarily implies the less than ideal. If we take moral philosophy to, at least, in part, serve as a guide for living, expressivism appears to fail in this task because one could hardly label expressivism as a guide for living, since the only rules one must live by are the ones which one sets for oneself. On one hand, if by "guide for living" we mean merely that one has any rule whatsoever to live by, then expressivism would be considered a good moral philosophy, but, on the other hand, if by "guide for living" we mean something else, something more robust, then expressivism will look weak as a method of informing one's actions in the moral sphere. I will now turn toward MacIntyre's outline of how expressivism is believed to operate in our present society.

[24] MacIntyre, Alasdair C. "The Nature of Moral Disagreement Today and the Claims of Emotivism." *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN, 2012, p. 14.

MacIntyre informs us that, "emotivism entails the obliteration of any genuine distinction between manipulative and non-manipulative social relations;"[25] however, this claim requires explanation. In the first instance, it is at least obvious what is meant by a manipulative versus a non-manipulative social relation. In the former, one employs coercion to produce a certain result, and the individual coerced is not given much consideration, but in the latter, one treats the other individual as an end in himself, a person who can rationally decide what the proper course of action is. In the words of MacIntyre, "to treat someone as an end is to offer them what I take to be good reasons for acting in one way rather than another."[26] In this instance, the offering of good reasons does not entail only one's personal feelings; it also entails some kind of objective, observable phenomenon that the agent in question can employ to determine something for himself. On the contrary, the method of coercion does not require a person to deliver any rationale to another person beyond something along the lines of, "because I said so."

Further, an expressivist will find no reason beyond mere feeling to disapprove of treating someone merely as a means and not an end, since there is no specific moral prohibition against doing so beyond approval or disapproval. MacIntyre insinuates that people in our present society are taught to, "see nothing but a meeting place for individual wills…who interpret reality as a series of opportunities for their enjoyment and for whom the last enemy is boredom."[27] In essence, the modern individual engages in the relegation of the self without fully realizing it.

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[25] MacIntyre, Alasdair C. "Emotivism: Social Content and Social Context." *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN, 2012, p. 23.

[26] MacIntyre, Alasdair C. "Emotivism: Social Content and Social Context." *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN, 2012, p. 23.

[27] MacIntyre, Alasdair C. "Emotivism: Social Content and Social Context." *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN, 2012, p. 25.

Individuals, while they appear to be raising themselves up and ridding themselves of the pesky requirements of morality, are in reality, merely ignoring the requirements of morality, which still exist and are grounded in the cosmos, but the details of this have yet to be established. For now, it is sufficient to engage with MacIntyre's discussion of what he calls "characters" to fully appreciate the status of the modern person.

MacIntyre claims that, "characters partially define the possibilities of plot and action;"[28] thus, "to understand them is to be provided with a means of interpreting the behavior of the actors who play them."[29] The key point from this, is the idea of interpretation. It is through the viewing of a character that an onlooker gains a higher level of awareness about the world they're acting in. MacIntyre makes it clear that by "characters" he means people who exist in the world we live in.

In each society, characters express a particular kind of role, and the role that a character specifies exists in a multitude of modalities. For instance, an individual may elect to become a teacher, and after becoming a teacher, the individual may realize that their role requires actions that they do not believe in, such as the assigning of homework or some other such thing. Yet, as a teacher, the individual must suppress their personal beliefs in favor of what the role requires, and by extension, the institution one is a part of. MacIntyre notes that one's, "own beliefs may be quite other than…those expressed in the actions presented."[30] Yet, the

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[28] MacIntyre, Alasdair C. "Emotivism: Social Content and Social Context." *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN, 2012, p. 27.

[29] MacIntyre, Alasdair C. "Emotivism: Social Content and Social Context." *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN, 2012, p. 27.

[30] MacIntyre, Alasdair C. "Emotivism: Social Content and Social Context." *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN, 2012, p. 29.

disjunction between individual and role is not the only available option for individuals in the workforce. At times, an individual may properly conform to their role, meaning, their individual beliefs and actions align with the role in which they're a part. In this case, as in the case of the disjunction, "the demand is that…role and personality be fused."[31] I will now turn toward the status of an individual within an expressivist framework, and I will close with Stout's take on expressivism.

According to MacIntyre, the paradigm currently operated in, is one in which there is a plurality of opinion, a plurality of what one might consider moral or good. In the case of expressivism, it is helpful to recall that nothing is truly moral, and one can effectively choose to do whatever action they see fit, so long as they find the action beneficial for themselves. As a derivative, MacIntyre follows this line of reasoning to claim that, "the democratized self…has no necessary social content…it is… itself nothing."[32] Because one can decide for himself what roles one will fill, one can effectively forge any identity one wishes, with little concern for whether the identity being crafted is one worthy of having. In another context though, one does not need to forge their identity, nor their given ends, because from a MacIntyrean perspective, one's ends and identity are already given, but the individual in an expressivist framework does not believe this. The modern person believes they have no set ends before them. MacIntyre writes, "the emotivist self, in acquiring sovereignty…lost its traditional boundaries…and a view of human

[31] MacIntyre, Alasdair C. "Emotivism: Social Content and Social Context." *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN, 2012, p. 29.

[32] MacIntyre, Alasdair C. "Emotivism: Social Content and Social Context." *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN, 2012, p. 32.

life as ordered to a given end."[33] However, is it the case that expressivism, as outlined my MacIntyre, has become the dominant mode of thought for moral debate? Jeffrey Stout seems to think otherwise.

In *Democracy and Tradition*, Stout notes that MacIntyre employs C. L. Stevenson's conception of moral philosophy, a conception of early emotivism whereby individuals can find no way to terminate ethical discourse. Expressivism, understood here as emotivism, "startles ethical theorists, in part because they know that no more than a few contemporary philosophers believe that Stevenson's moral philosophy is true."[34] It is not the case that the moral life of all people has radically devolved into a state of total assertion, a state wherein individuals cease to appeal to actual, legitimate reasons for their moral beliefs. If this were the case, moral discourse would become a caricature of what people take to be reasons for their moral beliefs, since, according to an expressivist view, there are no factual reasons for moral beliefs. However, moral discourse does not operate in such a way that requires the individual participants to engage in cognitive dissonance, as individuals engaged in moral enquiries do cite actual reasons for their positions beyond mere preferences. Nevertheless, to avoid the conclusion of expressivism, MacIntyre advocates for a return to a traditional, virtue-based conception of the good life, which we will now turn to.

[33] MacIntyre, Alasdair C. "Emotivism: Social Content and Social Context." *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN, 2012, p. 34.

[34] Stout, Jeffrey. "The New Traditionalism." *Democracy and Tradition*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 2004, p. 123.

CHAPTER 3: ETHICS WITH METAPHYSICS

MacIntyre, in an Aristotelian fashion, claims that, "the whole point of ethics…is to enable man to pass from his present state to his true end."[35] From the moment an individual is born, one enters into an agreement with the rest of the world, namely, that one automatically, for as long as one lives, agrees to continue living in a specific relation to the absolute. In other words, no matter what one chooses to do, there is an absolute moral requirement upon individuals, whether they realize it or not. Life then, is a quest to perfect oneself while considering this information. The individual is in some way, to take Aristotle's argument further, *required* to better hit the target; it is not a mere suggestion, but the notion that an individual exists in a progressive scheme presupposes the idea that there is a target to hit, something universal and recognizable. Ethics, in this view, must provide, "some account of the essence of a man as a rational animal and above all, account for some human telos."[36] Accordingly, Man, in his existence as a species, has a definitive nature which cannot be reversed in any significant way, but one can employ one's given nature to arrive at a better position. In other words, all human beings are equipped with a degree of rationality that is superior to other animals, and in having this possession, they must direct it toward the proper end,

[35] MacIntyre, Alasdair C. "Why the Enlightenment Project of Justifying Morality Had to Fail." *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN, 2012, p. 54.

[36] MacIntyre, Alasdair C. "Why the Enlightenment Project of Justifying Morality Had to Fail." *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN, 2012, p. 52.

and this end is not determined randomly or by the individual in question. For now, though, it is enough to merely describe the Good in outline.

The Good, as a metaphysical concept, manifests itself in various tangible forms that are readily perceptible to the individual. Still, on the quest for the Good, one must determine what the purpose of one's life is. In other words, a telos must be designated, but this does not rule out the possibility that there are lower and higher ends, and during one's pursuit of these ends, one should be able to discern whether one is aspiring towards the right kinds of ends, ends understood in accordance with the functionality of a human being. Aristotle asserts that, "every action as well as choice is held to aim at some good."[37] Therefore, to determine whether a person is good, it is helpful to determine what the function of a person is. To further illustrate the teleological view of Man, an example of the minor sort will do.

To circumvent the difficulty of defining the telos of a person, it is necessary to evaluate persons only in relation to specificity. Since we cannot know any given person's telos for sure, we must employ a less robust version of one's telos. It is necessary to involve the notion of function as a factor, since, whatever is good will conform to its function. In the case of a doctor, a good doctor is one that administers medicine effectively, and when warranted, saves lives. In the case of a teacher, a good teacher is one that administers information effectively, thereby producing individuals that possess either more information than they previously did, or individuals who are capable of rational thought to a greater extent. In these two cases, "it is clear

[37] Aristotle, et al. "Book 1." *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2012, p. 1.

that the good would not be something common, universal, and one,"[38] since functionality exists in variance. However, while the Good is dependent upon specific circumstances, it is also true that defining the essence of a human involves specific circumstances which will yield a specific result. If we call into question what a person is to do while living, namely, what their function is, then the answer appears too broad, as the answer will be some variation of living well.

Aristotle notes, "the good does not become more choice-worthy through the addition of anything to it."[39] In other words, if there are instances of the Good in daily experience, then the individual who has these experiences is likely living well. However, there must be a universal good as well, something toward which all other goods are aligned, for, in each instance, the individual in question is striving toward a certain kind of perfection. Likewise, the achievement of a life well-lived is enough to describe an individual as a good individual, despite the apparent simplicity in this statement. Now, the task at hand requires an illustration of how one is to achieve a life well-lived.

If we return to MacIntyre for a moment, we will find that he relates a metaphysical, universal good, with the notion of God. He writes, "morality did in the eighteenth century…presuppose something very like the teleological scheme of God…detach morality from that framework and you will no longer have morality."[40] According to MacIntyre, without the

[38] Aristotle, et al. "Book 1." *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2012, p. 8.

[39] Aristotle, et al. "Book 10." *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2012, p. 212.

[40] MacIntyre, Alasdair C. "Why the Enlightenment Project of Justifying Morality Had to Fail." *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory,* University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN, 2012, p. 56.

existence of God, or at the very least something like a universal, objective good, it becomes very difficult to maintain objective morality. MacIntyre said, "once the notion of essential human purposes or functions disappears from morality, it begins to appear implausible to treat moral judgements as factual statements."[41] According to this view, if an individual fails to realize that they have a definitive role in the cosmos, then he will likely morally suffer as a result. He will no longer have a way of grounding his moral statements with confidence. MacIntyre goes on to claim, "moral judgements are linguistic survivals from the practices of classical theism,"[42] and once removed from that context, morality collapses as the individual takes precedence over the Good. MacIntyre is content to maintain the existence of a divine source of moral clarity, and he notes that after the collapse of theism, "what was then invented was the individual."[43] In effect, one's definitive place in the cosmos was lost, God invoked no fear, and morality was up in the air. However, even if we sidestep theism, morality does not have to be cast out and forgotten, that is, if the individual can be reoriented in a particular social context, then morality can be saved.

[41] MacIntyre, Alasdair C. "Why the Enlightenment Project of Justifying Morality Had to Fail." *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory,* University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN, 2012, p. 59.

[42] MacIntyre, Alasdair C. "Why the Enlightenment Project of Justifying Morality Had to Fail." *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory,* University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN, 2012, p. 60.

[43] MacIntyre, Alasdair C. "Why the Enlightenment Project of Justifying Morality Had to Fail." *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory,* University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN, 2012, p. 61.

CHAPTER 4: ETHICS WITHOUT METAPHYSICS

In this final chapter, I will begin by continuing a discussion of MacIntyre with an emphasis on the relativistic nature of moral language as it functions in specific frameworks. From here, I will then move toward a discussion of Stout's ethics, which involve an absence of metaphysical references. Finally, to close, I will perform a brief comparison of MacIntyre and Stout, highlighting the similarities between these two thinkers insofar as they are oppositional to Hart and Schindler, while illustrating the main difference between them, namely, that MacIntyre posits a metaphysical grounding for moral language, while Stout does not cross that line. Such a comparison will prove fruitful to properly illustrate the point of contention between these two thinkers, and similarly, the point of contention that exists between Hart and Schindler on the one hand, and those that lack metaphysical principles on the other.

Firstly, in MacIntyre's thought, we can see that moral language functions in a relativistic manner, as it is always grounded in particular social contexts. For example, in relation to characters, we saw that characters define moral life for those around them, via their respective roles, and these people are individuals who have ideally had their personality fused with their given role. Moreover, in relation to heroic societies, societies depicted by the likes of Homer in the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*, MacIntyre explained that individuals are equipped with a plethora of influences that serve as moral guidance. More specifically, individuals in classical Greece looked toward the stories of old as guides for living. These individuals had clearly defined roles with prescribed modes of behavior, and these modes of behavior were in part, borrowed and informed

by stories depicting heroic societies. In these stories, the virtues were on display, as the stories of Homer, "provided a moral background to contemporary debate in classical societies."[44]

For example, if a common person in ancient Athens wished to have a fruitful discussion concerning virtue and its many forms, it would not be out of practice to consult a character like Odysseus. Likewise, in classical society, one is born into a fixed set of beliefs and practices that allow for little variance. "In such a society a man knows who he is by knowing his role in…structures."[45] Thus, while classical society may be labeled as conservative, it provided a definitive outline for living which entailed moral standards. In almost all cases, individuals had a guide for life that did not entail the necessity of anything from outside; one's society provided everything one needed for moral judgements. One could simply learn what was expected of one by observing one's parents and those around one with higher statuses.

In a heroic society, "morality and social structure are…one and the same…Morality as something distinct does not yet exist."[46] Questions of morality, in this case, involve questions of what one ought to do, but evaluative judgements concerning actions do not yet imply a new category, since nothing from the outside is required. In other words, heroic societies did not need to consult individuals across borders to determine whether one's own actions were virtuous, and this discernment did not necessarily involve metaphysics, as the

[44] MacIntyre, Alasdair C. "The Virtues of Heroic Societies." *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory,* University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN, 2012, p. 121.

[45] MacIntyre, Alasdair C. "The Virtues of Heroic Societies." *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory,* University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN, 2012, p. 122.

[46] MacIntyre, Alasdair C. "The Virtues of Heroic Societies." *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory,* University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN, 2012, p. 123.

society in question had clearly defined understandings of what sort of actions constituted virtuous ones, and these understandings were likely arrived at through discourse.

If, for instance, an individual was to borrow money from one's father, it would be clear that the offspring entered a new mode of existence, one of indebtedness, bringing with it its own set of obligations. If the offspring did not repay the money, he would be engaged, "in the enterprise of trying to make himself disappear,"[47] since an individual cannot escape from their role once they have entered it. The primary obligation in this case is simply to repay the money, and this obligation is not self-imposed, nor is it imposed from the outside, as those within the system will hold the individuals in question to the standard. Notice, however, that the owing of money in this case is only between two individuals, yet it is universal. It transforms the existence of the offspring and the father into a unified relationship involving an implied contract, and whenever individuals share conceptions of what it means to loan and borrow, the relationship is valid. Likewise, all standards and norms originate from within a particular context, and this context informs the individuals who are a part of it.

Similarly, from the moment one is born, one has eternally entered a relationship with another human being, as one cannot change the place in which one is born, nor the individuals they're born to, and this will effectively impact one's way of viewing the world. More specifically, individuals learn specific ways of evaluating moral claims, and these ways are largely inherited from the society in which one is a part. By the same token, according to

[47] MacIntyre, Alasdair C. "The Virtues of Heroic Societies." *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN, 2012, p. 126.

MacIntyre, individuals evaluate claims based on the tools they've been given, and "all questions of choice arise within the framework; the framework itself therefore cannot be chosen."[48]

As an example, it is unlikely that a citizen from ancient Athens would experience an existential crisis centered around questions of morality, since questions of this kind would appear to already be settled. Further, a member of a heroic society would likely not question whether one should aspire to be honored, because honor implies worthiness of life and a contribution of some kind to the whole of society. In any variance of these situations, individuals would, "have no doubt that reality is as they represent it to themselves."[49] However, while questions of morality appear to be settled in a heroic society, it is now necessary to attempt to determine whether they *really were* settled, but this is exactly the kind of question that Jeffrey Stout wishes to avoid.

In *Democracy and Tradition*, Jeffrey Stout wrote, "my story focuses on what can reasonably be taken for granted by ordinary speakers under conditions of religious diversity."[50] This story is precisely what binds Stout's project of modest pragmatism together. Given the pluralistic nature of our present society, we need a way of engaging with various interlocutors in a manner that does justice to the topic being discussed, especially if the discussion is designed to lead one to objective moral statements that individuals in similar circumstances can agree on. However, objective morality in Stout's view, is not objective in the same manner as objectivity

[48] MacIntyre, Alasdair C. "The Virtues of Heroic Societies." *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN, 2012, p. 126.

[49] MacIntyre, Alasdair C. "The Virtues of Heroic Societies." *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN, 2012, p. 126.

[50] Stout, Jeffrey. "Secularization and Resentment." *Democracy and Tradition*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 2004, p. 101.

understood alongside metaphysics, as Stout holds objectivity to be defined by individuals in a social setting who are attempting to arrive at what is true, while our thinkers who employ metaphysics hold objectivity to be universal in a way that separates morality from the individuals involved with the morality. For instance, some individuals believe that a universal, objective standard of right and wrong is required if the word "moral" is to denote anything objective at all, and the yearning for an objective standard of this kind is indicative of one's wish not to fall into absolute relativism and a loss of meaning, yet these effects are not guaranteed when one sidesteps theism. The categories of true and false can still be employed in the absence of theism. As an illustration, by observing something outside of the boundaries of my body, I know that the thing observed must either be another person with his own consciousness, or the thing observed must be an object of some kind. In either case, whatever is observed has a definitive relationship to truth-hoods and falsehoods, but as an individual moves from evaluating the objects around him to questions of moral value, it is not surprising why an individual would attempt to apply the same criteria of truth to these questions as well. However, in one's attempt at performing moral evaluations, difficulty arises, and it is precisely this difficulty that requires investigation. Is something like a transcendent God necessary to have a coherent moral system, or at the very least, necessary for one to have personal ethical guidelines to live by that are not entirely subjective? To answer this question, I will consult Stout's view of ethics.

Early, in *Ethics After Babel,* Stout highlights the tension created when one encounters plurality in the space of moral philosophy. He asks, "If ethics does not have an agreed basis in universal rational principles…aren't we compelled to become moral nihilists?"[51] In

[51] Stout, Jeffrey. "Moral Disagreement." *Ethics after Babel*: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J, 2001, p. 13.

short, no, but this question, and ones like it, allude to the negative feeling created by a plethora of moral theory. Stout notes that when a student of philosophy first engages in the field of ethics, he will inevitably be met with differing systems of morality, all of which appear to entail different criteria for evaluating moral life. Even if the similarities among them become apparent, the differences among them appear even more apparent.

Likewise, a student who has been won over by Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics* may come to believe that the point of moral philosophy is to become a better individual, to better hit the target, and if one is very optimistic, to perfect one's soul. However, when this same individual encounters authors influenced by Lutheranism, he may become critical of his formerly held beliefs. Perhaps he now believes that the point of moral philosophy is not to become better, not to engage in therapy, but instead, it is to adjudicate conflict and simply manage people, a much less optimistic outlook. In short, "students who began by agreeing in turn with each author they read often end up thinking that the only way to avoid intellectual promiscuity is to stop giving themselves to any author."[52] In the face of plurality, we are not condemned to a perilous situation devoid of moral dialogue, yet skeptics and nihilists still proceed, "by providing so little universal grounding for moral reasoning that it threatens to collapse,"[53] and some Christian thinkers proceed, "by requiring more universal grounding than could ever be supplied."[54] I will

[52] Stout, Jeffrey. "Moral Disagreement." *Ethics after Babel*: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J, 2001, p. 14.

[53] Stout, Jeffrey. "Moral Disagreement." *Ethics after Babel*: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J, 2001, p. 16.

[54] Stout, Jeffrey. "Moral Disagreement." *Ethics after Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J, 2001, p. 16.

now turn toward a brief discussion of the latter claim in order to explicate some of the rationality behind the impulse of avoiding metaphysics, understood here as referring to God.

At the core of the theological position, there is an epistemic gap between the perceiving individual and the transcendence that provides moral grounding. In other words, it is with great difficulty that an individual becomes sure that they're behaving morally, as the evidence which one employs in this context resides within a being that is, in many ways, unknowable to the individual. Here, I take the word "knowable" to refer to more than a simple awareness of something. By knowable I mean that one truly knows the thing in question; it is readily observable and describable in more than just the abstract. I do not have a Kantian distinction between the phenomenal and the noumenal in mind, as I do not wish to claim that an individual cannot know everyday objects because of the mysterious gap between the object and the object-in-itself. Instead, my aim is to explicate the middle ground between those that maintain the absolute necessity of metaphysics in moral dealings, and those that claim moral dealings are impossible, some nihilists and skeptics. Such a middle ground will appear as a secular morality, and it will inevitably require a tactful handling of diversity and plurality without falling into the trap of absolute moral relativism, a relativity akin to expressivism. I will now begin a sketch of this secular morality in outline.

Firstly, it should be noted that when it comes to discussions which concern morality, some level of agreement is necessary to get the discussion off the ground. If one is engaging in a dialogue on the topic of what is good, but one of the parties does not seem to understand what the word "good" denotes, then an issue arises that is more fundamental than simple moral disagreement. As Stout notes, "if somebody's opinions on moral matters across the board were said to have no overlap with ours…it is not clear why we should hold our opinions to

be about moral matters."[55] In other words, if there is no actual content to words like "moral" and "good" that two parties can agree on, then it is impossible to engage with interlocuters on the topic of moral philosophy, and it will very quickly become unclear what one ought to do in any situation whatsoever. Further, other terms, such as the various virtues, may be evaluated among individuals with different moral outlooks, as these terms may yield a discussion that is easier to settle, since the terms involved are more robust, and more readily defined.

Still, agreement of some kind is required, but it should also be noted that more agreement does not yield more truth, as it's possible for a plethora of individuals to simply be mistaken about a particular topic or a particular moral stance. Therefore, it is necessary to have a way of proceeding that can allow individuals to successfully navigate the diversity found among people, while also being cautious of too much agreement, especially agreement which lacks substantial evidence. But before we begin proceeding down the middle path, let us suppose that we are not yet ready to move away from the theological position. By exploring this position again, we can ensure that we are being careful and not too hasty in our conclusions. Let us suppose that God is still a necessary component of moral life, that it is impossible to know what is truly moral without God informing us of this either through the inspired Word of God via the Bible, or through revelation of some kind. If we combine this proposition with MacIntyre's statement that, "all questions of choice arise within the framework; the framework itself therefore cannot be chosen,"[56] we will yield a problematic result.

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[55] Stout, Jeffrey. "Moral Disagreement." *Ethics after Babel*: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J, 2001, p. 21.

[56] MacIntyre, Alasdair C. "The Virtues of Heroic Societies." *After Virtue*: A Study in Moral Theory, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN, 2012, p. 126.

While the framework initially referred to in MacIntyre's statement pointed to one's socio-historical position in the world, it can also refer to one's intellectual position at our current point in time. If the Bible is the inspired Word of God, then we have already established that there is a certain degree of distance between Man and God, since we are never truly reading God's words directly. Even if we posit that this is not the case and claim that the Logos became flesh in the form of Christ, we have assumed the conclusion of divine moral grounding a priori, since one who assumes the truth of the Trinity is likely to assume the truth of the Bible. However, it is quite clear that arguing for these truths is a difficult task, since, "you cannot somehow leap out of culture and history altogether and gaze directly into the Moral Law…any more than you can gaze directly into the mind of God."[57] In the case of referencing the Moral Law and in the case of referring to God, the grounding for morality, is at minimum, far removed from one's current position in existence, and it is at least difficult to discern specific moral statements from either of these sources. If we are to proceed toward the discovery of what one ought to do in various situations, it should now be evident that it is possible to do so within one's environmental context, with the acknowledgement that morality will be definitionally human and variant, but we will have to avoid expressivism at all costs. To fall within the trap of expressivism would be to involve oneself with, "choosing a life of fatted cattle,"[58] since one within an expressivist framework can effectively do whatever one pleases with little regard for philosophical discourse. As of present, I will briefly mention expressivism once more, with the

[57] Stout, Jeffrey. "Moral Disagreement." *Ethics after Babel*: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J, 2001, p. 23.

[58] Aristotle, et al. "Book 1." *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2012, p. 6.

goal of shedding light on the difference between expressivism and Stout's take on ethics, so that Stout's view may be more readily understood.

In MacIntyre's *After Virtue,* expressivism is a philosophy which claims that all moral statements are statements of opinions and feelings, and moral statements cannot have a truth-value whatsoever. If we can show that expressivism is false by presenting a way in which one could understand moral statements outside of that framework, while maintaining that moral statements are truth claims, then secular moral philosophy is possible in the form of a social program, one which involves discourse among individuals aimed at pragmatic ends. So far, doubt has been cast upon a metaphysical moral law, in whatever form it may come, but Stout does not reject the notion of a moral law altogether. In fact, Stout maintains the possibility of a moral law in the form of, "an infinitely large set consisting of all the true moral claims."[59] Since this moral law is inherently infinite, as it contains all the true claims that pertain to moral questions, the human mind will not be capable of understanding this law. It is definitionally out of reach, and we should not expect it to be otherwise. No human has ever understood or been aware of all the truth claims in any field of study, so the fact that a large part of ethical discourse will forever be locked away, outside of our reach, should not be worrisome. Further, the epistemic gap between one's assertion of truth and the truth itself poses no dilemma for an individual engaged in modest, pragmatic ethics, since we do not need to know the validity of all moral statements to operate morally in the world; we only need to know the truth-values of moral statements as they appear to us. In the absence of metaphysics, we are left with a, "contextualist

[59] Stout, Jeffrey. "The Ideal of a Common Morality." *Democracy and Tradition*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 2004, p. 240.

epistemology,"[60] that asks us to begin, "confining attention to accessible truths."[61] In other words, as an individual embarks on the task of defining what is moral in each situation, one must only invoke ideas and principles that are readily perceptible in one's environment, and individuals already engage in this kind of problem-solving in nonmoral situations. Therefore, there is nothing radically new being proposed here.

For instance, if I claim that there is a blue couch in the living room, one could reasonably discern the truth-value of this claim. Once an individual is aware of all the relevant information, it will be very easy to claim that the proposition I have made is either true or false. In other words, there are always, in every evaluation of truth, assumed metrics by which an individual can measure the validity of a claim, whether moral or immoral, and these metrics are provided by one's place in a particular geo-historical context. Since this context exists in variation, a standard of objectivity is still at work when evaluating moral claims, but it is relative in nature. Still, there is a way of evaluating the weight of a claim by determining the extent to which a claim can be doubted. If an individual holds certain beliefs about a moral situation, he will always be, "justified in holding such beliefs, except in those cases where we have adequate reason to doubt or reject them."[62] If for instance, an individual believed there to be a blue couch in a given living room, he would be justified in maintaining that belief insofar as no other individual could cast a significant amount of doubt concerning that belief. In this case, one could easily settle the matter by simply viewing the room in question, but in more abstract cases, the

[60] Stout, Jeffrey. "The Ideal of a Common Morality." *Democracy and Tradition*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 2004, p. 240.

[61] Stout, Jeffrey. "The Ideal of a Common Morality." *Democracy and Tradition*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 2004, p. 240.

[62] Stout, Jeffrey. "The Ideal of a Common Morality." *Democracy and Tradition*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 2004, p. 234.

situation seems more difficult. Likewise, for some, the claim that moral statements have truth-values is controversial, and this statement is indicative of a certain kind of worry, one that is skeptical in nature, but there is also another kind of worry.

Some individuals worry that when morality is detached from metaphysics, morality ceases to exist in an important way, and this worry is a product of the tendency to hold the belief that ethics, or morals, are something separate from human life, with an independence of their own, held in place by a metaphysical being. For Stout, such a belief is unnecessary. When dealing with truth claims in a normal modality, individuals do not invoke metaphysical ideas. In fact, "most ordinary people, including many children, exhibit a practical grasp of what truth is,"[63] and this grasp is had without an appeal to ideas outside of one's normative epistemic situations. In other words, an individual exists within a particular framework, and that framework has equipped the individual in question with the resources needed to evaluate truth-claims.

Of course, one's approach or resources might have been other than they are since an individual could have been born into a different society. However, these possibilities are outside of one's control, and we do not need to dwell on them. The bottom line is that an individual can evaluate truth-claims, moral or otherwise. If a child is asked whether two plus two is equivalent to four, he will likely agree, and in his agreement, he will likely assert that the equation bears a truth-value, precisely in that it is true. In this case, as in many others, individuals deliberate about the specific situation they're in, and they look only to their situation to evaluate the truth-value of various claims, moral or otherwise. According to Stout, discussions

[63] Stout, Jeffrey. "Ethics as a Social Practice." *Democracy and Tradition*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 2004, p. 255.

concerning morality develop and change over time, and these discussions are had for the purpose of discovering what is true.

The reason individuals engage in moral discourse in the first place is largely either to convince another of one's moral position, or to be convinced by another of their moral position if their moral position appears more accurate. Discourse within this "liberal project,"[64] exists, "simply to tailor the political institutions and moral discourse of modern societies to the facts of pluralism."[65] No one person can lay claim to the truth, but we must assume that moral statements have the possibility of being true. If we did not assume that moral statements bear truth, moral discourse would not exist because it would simply consist in two parties sharing their feelings with each other, each helplessly attempting to persuade the other to have the same emotions as they do, but it is obvious that this is not how moral discourse operates. Instead, moral discourse generates a particular kind of truth claim that carries with it, "warranted assertibility."[66]

Warranted assertibility partially refers to all the factors that relate to a given proposition that happens to yield a truth value. In other words, it is simply that which renders a particular belief in something a "justified belief,"[67] thereby separating the claim from the opinion of a single individual. If a particular claim really is justified, then other individuals within one's

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[64] Stout, Jeffrey. "The New Traditionalism." *Democracy and Tradition,* Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 2004, p. 129.

[65] Stout, Jeffrey. "The New Traditionalism." *Democracy and Tradition,* Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 2004, p. 129.

[66] Stout, Jeffrey. "Moral Disagreement." *Ethics after Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents,* Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J, 2001, p. 26.

[67] Stout, Jeffrey. "Moral Disagreement." *Ethics after Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents,* Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J, 2001, p. 27.

framework will be forced to agree about the truth-hood of the moral claim, that is, if they are of equal rational capacity and recognize all the terms involved in the enquiry. We are, in each case, just as in science, attempting to discover truths about the world around us, and the assertions we make can be wrong, even if we do not know that they are. For example, individuals previously believed in the geocentric model of the solar system, and they took this model to be indicative of the world as it is, but as it turned out, with the accumulation of more evidence, we now take the heliocentric model of the solar system to be the representation of how the solar system is. Still, in science, as in moral philosophy, we must proceed in each instance as if we really did know something was true, but we should also be open to the possibility of new evidence overturning our positions. Still, there is always an epistemic gap that exists between the truth itself and our evidence for the truth. Nevertheless, individuals can still agree on the truth of moral statements, but this agreement does not rule out the possibility of disagreement. In other words, agreement serves as an approximation of what is moral. In the case of ethics, one is attempting to discover certain truths, and these truths are of a moral nature. Each moral statement is either true or false, and one's evidence for or against a claim, is in service of providing a truth claim with moral content, not simply a claim that happens to have evidence in support of it by forgery or some other means. To illustrate this point, I will now turn toward Stout's view of slavery, as it is an important example that he cites at multiple instances in *Ethics After Babel*.

In *Ethics After Babel*, Stout states, "I hold that slavery…is evil,"[68] and he takes this to be a moral truth that anyone in our current situation would agree with. The epistemic justification for this statement lies within our present means of investigation at our current point in history. Still,

[68] Stout, Jeffrey. "Moral Disagreement." *Ethics after Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J, 2001, p. 21.

justification is always relativistic in nature, as the evidence available to an individual shifts with the passing of time and resources. Currently, our tools of reference may include the golden rule, or alternatively, it may include a simple perception of how people around one is treated. We saw in MacIntyre's discussion of characters that individuals learn normative behavior by viewing others. Likewise, the erroneous nature of slavery would be painfully obvious to an individual who exists in a culture that posits that all humans are created equal, especially if one witnessed one individual being treated as something other than human, while they and others around them were being treated better. The difference would require an explanation, and explanations in favor of slavery do not hold the same level of persuasive power as they once did.

One such explanation comes in the form of, "God had designated certain classes of people as slaves after the Flood."[69] While this explanation, did at one point, hold explanatory power, likely for Christians in particular, it would likely fail to convince the majority of people today because the statement involves terms that are not readily perceptible, as it employs concepts that are abstract in nature and difficult to prove. Further, the fact that we no longer take slavery to be a moral practice illustrates the idea that error can arise in pursuit of the truth; at one point people really did believe God made certain individuals slaves, or to frame the matter differently, people really did believe slavery was moral. Based on our circumstances today, Stout believes that we can rightly conclude that the practice of slavery is immoral, and it was in the past as well, from the perspective of a contemporary American. However, Christians and Jews throughout history may have been justified in believing that slavery was acceptable, and to some degree, moral, since it was permitted, after all. Still, there is a sense in which Stout cannot say,

[69] Stout, Jeffrey. "Moral Disagreement." *Ethics after Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J, 2001, p. 29.

once and for all, that slavery is immoral because there is always an epistemic gap operating in the background of one's truth claims. To further illustrate the context-dependent nature of moral investigation, I will now turn toward MacIntyre once more while explicating Stout's position further.

Like Stout, MacIntyre also perceives an epistemic gap in our moral enquiries, but this does not mean that moral statements lose truth-value. In terms of moral development, MacIntyre invokes the importance of practices in human rationality and the generation of norms. Essentially, "MacIntyre's position on practices is that there are some forms of cooperative human activity to which human moral relationships are integral."[70] In other words, without a defined context to begin one's investigation into moral standards, it is impossible to begin the endeavor in the first place, and we should note that the starting place, while not perfect, does not render everything that comes after it subjective. Individuals can begin an enquiry within a given framework, and from there discern, to the best of their ability, what the best tradition so far is.

Relativity can be a worrisome word in moral philosophy, but it doesn't have to be. As an individual proceeds, he is to note that, "justification in morality, as in science, is relative-but relative to one's epistemic circumstance."[71] What is taken as truth today, may be taken as false tomorrow because, "all morality is always to some degree tied to the socially local and

[70] Lutz, Christopher Stephen. "Is MacIntyre's Theory of Tradition Relativistic?" *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre: Relativism, Thomism, and Philosophy*, Lexington Books, Lanham, 2009, p. 77.

[71] Stout, Jeffrey. "Moral Disagreement." *Ethics after Babel*: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J, 2001, p. 29.

particular."[72] This means that morality is relative in nature, but it still retains a component of objectivity.

Up to this point, it has been suggested that moral statements are facts; they can either be true or false, but what sort of facts are they? From what has just been said, it appears that morals statements must be facts, but relative facts. To determine what one ought to do in a particular situation, one must look at the situation in question, as the answer cannot be found anywhere else. Stout claims that, "what one morally ought to do is a fact, but a relational fact…relative to epistemic context."[73] Individuals have the tools to proceed with moral evaluations, and these tools are given to them via the framework in which they're a part, namely, the society to which one belongs. By "tools," I mean everything that one has learned to either do or employ in the pursuit of truth-claims. Once an individual has been raised in a particular society, an individual is tasked with figuring out the truth of various statements in a plethora of situations, but everything arises from within a particular framework, and evaluation must proceed with the tools gained from the society in which one is a part, as we are equipped with a kind of first language, as MacIntyre would say, that cannot be shaken off. However, by maintaining the existence of a cross-cultural truth, namely, a truth-claim that is true for people of multiple backgrounds, one can avoid the trap of relativism. Stout's view of ethics allows ethical discourse to terminate when a reasonable conclusion is arrived at among a group of people who have reasoned their way through a particular issue, and to illustrate this point, I will now turn toward an example that Stout provides in *Ethics After Babel*.

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[72] MacIntyre, Alasdair C. "The Virtues of Heroic Societies." *After Virtue*: A Study in Moral Theory, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN, 2012, p. 126.

[73] Stout, Jeffrey. "The Spectrum of Relativity." *Ethics after Babel*: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J, 2001, p. 89.

We know in certain societies, individuals behave differently, and they may disagree about statements of morality. However, "suppose the society in question is our local college eating club, which engages in cannibalistic practices as part of its initiation rites."[74] Granted that this society in question exists within the same framework as we do and has access to the same epistemic means as we do, we could justly condemn the practice of eating others under these circumstances, regardless of how willing the individuals were to engage in cannibalism. There are no special, extenuating circumstances in their defense. Insofar as one can rebuke the reasons for behaving in a certain manner, while withstanding the doubt cast upon one's own assertions, one can gain confidence that one's own moral convictions hold weight.

By reflecting on either slavery or cannibalism, one can see that not all moral issues are interminable, and if these practices become void in a particular society, it must be because something about them has become internally incoherent from the viewpoint of the individuals involved. Disagreement, as well as agreement, counts for something, and agreement is often an approximation of the truth. From a pragmatic perspective, it is enough to show that in an ideal setting, individuals could arrive at moral statements through arguments alone, without the use of force or coercion. Now, if the society in question happens to fall outside of our framework, how are we to proceed?

One can still proceed with the acknowledgement that what any given individual is doing is either moral or immoral, since to maintain this view would simply be to maintain the category of truth as it is applied to the outside world. "Absolutism, taken as the view that there is a single true morality…does not conflict with the idea that the actual moral languages are in fact

[74] Stout, Jeffrey. "The Spectrum of Relativity." *Ethics after Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J, 2001, p. 87.

quite various."[75] There have been a number of ethical theories throughout the years, all of which, in this view, are attempting to approximate or arrive at the truth of the situation, and the situation is simply whatever is actually moral for a human being to do or to emulate. Still, it is impossible to genuinely know the truth, once and for all. Still, philosophers and others alike can employ various arguments and refer to the specific situation in question to discern what one ought to do, and if the task appears obscure and with great difficulty, we should keep in mind that, "moral philosophy isn't easy."[76]

In the realm of moral evaluation, an individual can easily begin with the specifics in mind, rather than with universal metaphysical principles, as "it is misleading to say that morality has (or requires) any foundation."[77] Moral propositions have their foundation, if there is one, within a particular system, i.e., people of a given society and culture. In a democracy, individuals are invited to challenge the positions of others, and to the extent that a given proposition withstands the scrutiny of others, it is thoroughly justified and objectively true, that is, of course, from the perspective of those challenging the viewpoint and those who hold the viewpoint. Likewise, if individuals can overcome moral disputes, then from the perspective of modest pragmatism, the moral statements generated are objective. Moral claims can be, "universal in the sense of applying to everyone, without requiring a supposedly universal point

[75] Stout, Jeffrey. "The Spectrum of Relativity." *Ethics after Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J, 2001, p. 97.

[76] Stout, Jeffrey. "The Spectrum of Relativity." *Ethics after Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J, 2001, p. 95.

[77] Stout, Jeffrey. "Religion and Morality." *Ethics after Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J, 2001, p. 120.

of view for its justification."[78] The only point of view that is required is the perspective of the people participating in each society.

Moreover, what is needed for moral propositions is a robust conversation about whether a particular action is moral, according to the epistemic situation of a people. Within societal structures, implicit norms are established; these are behaviors, beliefs, and modes of action that glue a people together, and once these norms are vocalized, that is, made explicit, they help guide the conversation concerning morality. Norms, "allow us to ask such questions as whether there should be a role of master [and] whether women ought to have the opportunity to be political leaders."[79] Anyone participating in a society automatically participates in the following of norms and norm-formation, and given enough time and discourse, moral questions can be settled. Still, there is a sense in which Stout's objectivity is different in kind from the objectivity referred to by the Christian thinkers discussed in the first chapter.

The term "universal," as it is used by Stout, can be understood by analyzing the distinction between something that is relativistic and something that falls under the category of relativism more broadly. First, it would be helpful to discuss the context in which relativism arises. According to one scholar of MacIntyre, Christopher Stephen Lutz, "relativism can arise only through an epistemological crisis in which the rational standards of a tradition lose their authority over the adherents of that tradition."[80] The problem of relativism does not have to arise

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[78] Stout, Jeffrey. "Democratic Norms in the Age of Terrorism." *Democracy and Tradition*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 2004, p. 195.

[79] Stout, Jeffrey. "Democratic Norms in the Age of Terrorism." *Democracy and Tradition*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 2004, p. 195.

[80] Lutz, Christopher Stephen. "Is MacIntyre's Theory of Tradition Relativistic?" *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre*: *Relativism, Thomism, and Philosophy*, Lexington Books, Lanham, 2009, p. 87.

in a democratic society, as individuals who actively participate in such a society, will likely not experience a lasting epistemological crisis concerning what one ought to do in moral situations to any significant degree. In the case of slavery, it became clear that no one should have the title of master, and the debate centered around the topic of slavery did not yield an interminable void; it yielded a new norm, one which, as time progressed, was accepted by many people in America. I do not intend to say that the abolition of slavery occurred through pure reason, as violence was also employed. Further, it is true that tensions concerning moral issues can be high, but at some point, we can reasonably expect issues to be solved. If and when new positions arise through discourse, that is to be expected, and it is a sign of a healthy society. As more questions of morality arise, we should remember that, "relativity is simply the real condition of human enquiry."[81] However, quoting a scholar of MacIntyre in service of Stout raises the question: To what degree are MacIntyre and Stout similar in their approach to contemporary moral discourse? Answering this question will help illustrate two perspectives which are similar in many respects but are ultimately different in their final claims. MacIntyre engages with metaphysics to support moral statements, while Stout does not cross that line.

To begin the comparison, we will start with MacIntyre's understanding of traditions. If MacIntyre is interpreted as offering, "a very narrow conception of how traditions ought ideally to operate,"[82] then he is at odds with Stout. In this sense, traditions refer only to what is commonly referred to as "traditional," a term which carries with it implications of

[81] Lutz, Christopher Stephen. "Is MacIntyre's Theory of Tradition Relativistic?" *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre*: Relativism, Thomism, and Philosophy, Lexington Books, Lanham, 2009, p. 77.

[82] Stout, Jeffrey. "The New Traditionalism." *Democracy and Tradition*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 2004, p. 136.

mandatory beliefs and a lack of rigorous enquiry aimed at testing the internal consistency of one's position. While not MacIntyre's view, traditions according to this view may require a divine link to hold everything together, with little recognition of the personal, rational abilities of individuals that allow them to become actors in a broader society. MacIntyre's view does, however, usually presuppose the idea that moral statements maintain their status and validity not via the individuals who assert them, but via the cosmos, held in place by a divine link. Still, MacIntyre does allow that moral statements can be grounded within specific practices, fully equipped with their own languages, norms, and modes of evaluation. Likewise, if MacIntyre understands rationality as something which flourishes within a tradition, and if by tradition he simply means, "an enduring discursive practice,"[83] then there is no significant disagreement between Stout and MacIntyre, since individuals could be reasonably expected to resolve moral disagreement through rational means without directly appealing to a divine source.

Further, if MacIntyre is interpreted as having only a loose requirement of metaphysical grounding, and if MacIntyre understands a tradition as that which is, "dedicated to the project of loosening up [a conception of morality requiring metaphysics] democratically and dialogically,"[84] then MacIntyre is more closely aligned with Stout. For Stout, moral objectivity is not hooked up to the natural world; it is not a facet of reality outside of human interaction, and it is not held in place by a divine law giver or any such modality. Moral statements have their objectivity precisely in the subjectivity of perceiving individuals, individuals who are capable of judging matters according to a set of established norms and practices, and these norms and

[83] Stout, Jeffrey. "The New Traditionalism." *Democracy and Tradition*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 2004, p. 136.

[84] Stout, Jeffrey. "The New Traditionalism." *Democracy and Tradition*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 2004, p. 136.

practices can change over time. Accordingly, individuals who are hesitant to adopt this position may believe that Stout leaves, "ethical discourse without something sufficiently determinate or independent of us to be true of, to be about,"[85] and it is true that Stout does leave the discipline of ethics without metaphysical grounding, but morality instead finds its home within the minds of individuals who are capable of evaluation rooted in their epistemic context. In Stout's modest pragmatism, individuals must begin with the specifics in which one is a part, and then proceed from there; this is in opposition to beginning with abstract, metaphysical ideas.

Metaphysics are not needed to have conversations about ethics. For instance, if one claims that God is good, one has invoked a principle outside of God, namely, a reference to morality itself, and if one employs moral language to speak about God, then it is possible to use moral language in the absence of theological reference. Whether God was first required to generate morality in the first place can never be proven in this life, and my aim has been to merely demonstrate the possibility of secular morality in the form of Stout's modest, pragmatic system.

One may look to MacIntyre's discussion of practices for a guide to living, but this is just one option. Still, it can be helpful to study his conception of practices, as, "one would have to be sophomorically unreflective to resist such thought experiments."[86] In comparison, MacIntyre, like Stout, maintains that moral enquiry involves human rationality, which is at times various, as it is always context dependent, but the main difference between the two thinkers rests on the point of metaphysics, as Stout informs us that, "pragmatism comes into conflict with

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[85] Stout, Jeffrey. "Ethics without Metaphysics." *Democracy and Tradition*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 2004, p. 246.

[86] Stout, Jeffrey. "The Spectrum of Relativity." *Ethics after Babel*: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J, 2001, p. 102.

theology in ethical theory mainly at those points where someone asserts that the truth-claiming function of ethics depends, for its objectivity, on positing a transcendent and perfect being."[87] In Stout's view, no such positing is required.

[87] Stout, Jeffrey. "Ethics without Metaphysics." *Democracy and Tradition*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 2004, p. 268.

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