

Lecture 1 Appendix 1

Losing Our Rational Memories

What has happened to theology in the past few centuries (through the 'privatization' of religion, and the separation of theology and practice) can be illustrated by considering a story told by the moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre. According to MacIntyre modernity has lost its ethical memory and consequently does not know how to reason well about how to act. He asks his readers to

Imagine that the natural sciences were to suffer the effects of a catastrophe. A series of environmental disasters are blamed by the general public on the scientists. Widespread riots occur, laboratories are burnt down, physicists are lynched, books and instruments are destroyed. Finally a Know-Nothing political movement takes power and successfully abolishes science teaching in schools and universities, imprisoning and executing the remaining scientists. Later still there is a reaction against this destructive movement and enlightened people seek to revive science, although they have largely forgotten what it was. But all that they possess are fragments: a knowledge of experiments detached from any knowledge of the theoretical context which gave them significance; parts of theories unrelated either to the other bits and pieces of theory which they possess or to experiment; instruments whose use has been forgotten; half-chapters from books, single pages from articles, not always fully legible because torn and charred. None the less all these fragments are reembodyed in a set of practices which go under the revived names of physics, chemistry and biology. Adults argue with each other about the respective merits of relativity theory, evolutionary theory and phlogiston theory, although they possess only a very partial knowledge of each. Children learn by heart the surviving portions of the periodic table and recite as incantations some of the theorems of Euclid. Nobody, or almost nobody, realises that what they are doing is not natural science in any proper sense at all. For everything that they do and say conforms to certain canons of consistency and coherence and those contexts which would be needed to make sense of what they are doing have been lost, perhaps irretrievably.

In such a culture men would use expressions such as 'neutrino', 'mass', 'specific gravity', 'atomic weight' in systematic and often interrelated ways

which would resemble in lesser or greater degrees the ways in which such expressions had been used in earlier times before scientific knowledge had been so largely lost. But many of the beliefs presupposed by the use of these expressions would have been lost and there would appear to be an element of arbitrariness and even of choice in their application which would appear very surprising to us. What would appear to be rival and competing premises for which no further argument could be given would abound.¹

MacIntyre uses this apocalyptic possibility not for sci-fi effect, but rather to reveal how moral language is used in the contemporary West. He argues that the moral world we inhabit is very similar to this gravely disordered state of the natural sciences in his parabolic scenario.

What we possess are the fragments of a conceptual scheme, parts which now lack those contexts from which their significance derived. We possess indeed simulacra of morality, we continue to use many of the key expressions. But we have – very largely, if not entirely – lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, of morality.²

Part of the difficulty, in fact a problem that intensifies the trouble we are now in, with the analogy is that, unlike in his fictional imagining, we do not possess any record of a similar catastrophe as having taken place and as having left our moral world so badly fragmented. Consequently, we generally continue on blissfully unaware that anything has happened, and that the circumstances of our moral reasoning and speaking have drastically changed. All we have instead are its effects and, presumably he would agree, the witness of those who sense that something is wrong with our current situation.

One of the points underlying this lecture has been that just such has occurred in theology without many noticing. Certain shifts in understanding faith, reason, God and world have transpired, and in their turn have altered how each of these terms are understood and how their practical relevance is shaped. These we will analyse in the coming lectures.

¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 1.

² *Ibid.*, 2.