



Reconstructing the Moral Self: MacIntyre and Charles Taylor on Identity, Community, and the Good Life

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Abstract

In Western philosophy, the problem of the self remains a core issue in metaphysics, philosophy of mind, and epistemology. Recently, it has also been explored within a socio-moral context, emphasizing the connection between the self, socio-moral qualities, cultural traditions, and society or community. To better understand the link between self and morality, this paper compares the views of two communitarian philosophers, MacIntyre and Taylor, focusing on how they define morality as fundamental to the self within social and community contexts. The analysis shows that both emphasize community or society as the basis for morality and self-identity. While both critique modern morality, Taylor does not fully reject it or the modern self, whereas MacIntyre dismisses them entirely and proposes a moral framework rooted in Aristotelian ideas. He develops his theory through concepts like practice, tradition, and narrative, aimed at maintaining community and societal stability. Ultimately, the paper concludes that some of Taylor's ideas are more nuanced and advanced than MacIntyre's.

Keywords: Self, Morality, identity, Narrative, Practice and moral framework

1. Introduction

Western philosophy has long debated the concepts of self and morality through both liberal and communitarian perspectives. The liberal view, associated with thinkers such as John Locke, Hume, Immanuel Kant, and John Rawls, regards the self as an independent, rational agent capable of choice. This approach emphasises freedom and justice for personal development, with morality rooted in desire, emotion, and specific rules. These moral principles help shape the self as a rational being and

support a society based on liberty and justice. Conversely, the communitarian perspective, represented by figures such as MacIntyre and Charles Taylor, offers a fundamentally different understanding of self and morality, diverging significantly from the liberal or modern view.

2. MacIntyre on Self and Morality

MacIntyre challenges the modern view of the self as an independent individual, highlighting that our understanding of who we are depends on social ties, practices, traditions, and communities. He suggests the self isn't pre-existing but develops through participation in a socially and historically embedded environment. Moral identity forms by adopting community values and cultivating virtues vital to active participation in its practices. This view of morality stresses its social and narrative aspects. MacIntyre believes virtues like courage, justice, honesty, and responsibility derive their importance from specific practices and traditions, not as isolated qualities. Additionally, living a coherent life story through narrative unity enables individuals to see their actions as part of a meaningful whole aimed at certain goods. Consequently, the moral self is not just a rational chooser or a set of preferences but an agent whose identity is shaped by history, relationships, commitments, and goals. In essence, morality involves becoming a certain kind of person by participating in a shared moral community.

MacIntyre characterises the self as a social entity shaped by diverse cultures and traditions that form its moral foundation. He explains that "the self is socially constituted and its life's value and meaning are derived from a shared social order." According to MacIntyre, the self's identity is rooted in community affiliations such as family, nation, or city. The self is always in relation to others, not isolated from social organisations. He describes the self as a socio-moral being who engages with social norms and customs to attain specific goals or telos. These practices are essential for the self to become virtuous, aligning with the ultimate aim of his moral philosophy. A pertinent question arises: if practice is crucial for moral development, what exactly does he mean by practice? MacIntyre clarifies that practice refers to activities aimed at achieving particular ends. In his influential work, "After Virtue," he explicitly defines practice as follows.

Any coherent and complex form of socially-established cooperative human activity through which the goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended." (MacIntyre, .2007, p. 187).

MacIntyre suggests that we understand the self and identity best through narrative. He views the self as both a human being and a storyteller, with thoughts, actions, ideas, and personal information organised into stories. As such, he argues that narratives can explain everything. For him, narrative isn't just fictional; it's crucial for understanding and communication (MacIntyre, 2007, pp. 2011-216). He defines a narrative as a story that weaves together various practices and episodes of a person's life into a coherent whole from birth to death (Renani et al., 2022). A stable self, according to MacIntyre, can tell a story that links different episodes, such as being a teacher, doctor, advocate, or member of a social group.

He highlights that individual lives are connected to larger narratives involving institutions such as family, profession, organisations, city, and nation (MacIntyre, 2007, pp. 2020-221). His view of the self includes actions interpreted through others' perceptions, as well as habitual behaviours, feelings, and emotions, which shape one's identity (Renani et al., 2022, p. 418). He states, "we become what others already took us to be" (Renani et al., 2022, p. 418). He argues that an act is meaningful when society recognises it as motivated by good reason (Renani et al., 2022, p. 418). These actions are closely linked to morality, which is rooted in tradition—socially and historically embedded (MacIntyre, 2007, pp. 2021-222). Through tradition, individuals internalize the norms and customs of their community to cultivate virtues. For him, moral virtue equals self-knowledge. Traits such as courage or cowardice are evaluated according to how others interpret one's actions. Ultimately, the morality of the self depends on this social context.

MacIntyre argues that a morally good self cannot be formed solely through individual choice. He opposes modern individualism and emotivism, asserting that moral growth depends on practices that promote excellence, traditions that offer evaluation standards, and narratives that ensure continuity and purpose in human life. This view raises a key philosophical issue: if traditions shape the self deeply, how can individuals critically assess those traditions, especially if they contain unjust or exclusionary values? This tension makes MacIntyre's perspective highly relevant in contemporary moral philosophy. His theory argues that developing a virtuous self involves both belonging to a moral tradition and being able to reflect on it critically, linking personal moral growth to the potential for social moral change.

3. Charles Taylor's account of Self and Morality

Charles Taylor sees the self as fundamentally influenced by the social, cultural, and moral environments in which a person exists. According to him, individuals do not form their identities in isolation; instead, they understand themselves through relationships, language, culture, history, and meaningful values. Moral life involves more than just following rules or individual choices. It demands an orientation toward what Taylor calls “strong evaluations,” enabling individuals to distinguish between mere desires and truly worthwhile pursuits. In this way, the self becomes moral by associating its identity with higher goods and continually interpreting what gives life meaning and purpose.

In his book “Work Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity,” Taylor examines the complexity of the human self. Like MacIntyre, he argues that individuals are social beings with responsibilities toward their communities. He describes humans as self-interpreting and sometimes misinterpreting animals, emphasizing that self-interpretation holds ontological importance. Taylor argues that self-identity is shaped not only by biological factors but also through an ongoing process that connects past and present (Renani et al. 2022, p. 416). He critiques naturalistic views that assume all human and social phenomena are best explained through nature. According to Taylor, understanding the context in which the self-acts helps explain its actions. Therefore, he concludes that authenticity is never isolated; it is always related to others and does not seek a singular, isolated identity.

Taylor's position on identity refers to the self as an orientation in a moral space
(Golmohamad, 2004, p. 135).

Taylor emphasises that the self emerged in particular historical contexts—contexts that continuously pose risks of destroying or distorting the very goods modernity has uncovered. While traditionalists nostalgically longing for the past and radicals aiming for postmodern utopias both fall short, Taylor contends that neither group has truly escaped the modernity they critique.

For Taylor, morality is more than a set of rules; it provides a framework for significant personal growth. This growth enables the individual to evaluate their actions, life, and desires. He sees the self as striving for identity and goodness, often through strong evaluations that help distinguish right from wrong. This development is not determined by our desires, inclinations, or choices; it exists independently and provides standards for judgment (Buckley, 1991, p. 499).

Morality gives the self its identity as a human being, defining it as a moral animal with an innate moral nature, including an understanding of good and bad, and moral capacity. Thus, morality

is not a mental construct but embodied in the self's moral nature (Kho K P & Kumar, 2022, p. 71). The self is not merely devoid of good but is a moral entity embedded within a communal narrative and moral framework. Consequently, morality is seen as something given, not built. According to Taylor, humans inherently possess a sense of moral evaluation, making moral development crucial to human identity. Because of this innate morality, the self-strives for the highest good—called the hyper good achievable through moral sources such as reason, God, or nature. These sources provide the emotion, motivation, and strength needed to live well. The hyper good is universal and beyond personal interests; for example, justice, human rights, and freedom—transcending individual and social narratives (Kho K P & Kumar, 2022, p.71). Consequently, Taylor views the self as dynamic—transcending cultural boundaries in pursuit of the hyper good.

The self's existence can be confirmed through individual human life within an ethical context where the moral agent experiences a qualitatively good life. In this view, the self and the concept of good are linked. Language and the community's social and political culture shape this moral structure. Consequently, the moral framework is embodied in the existence of the self. Unlike other animals, humans are distinct because, while animals possess desires, sexuality, and emotions, humans go beyond this natural level and live in social communities with particular goals (Kho K P & Kumar, 02, p. 73).

Self can be discovered in social settings through one's virtuous identity. It can be understood from multiple layers, where one's identity is experienced within a socio-moral space. In this context, power and position within the self's matrix shape identity. Two key aspects shape the self: physical space and placement within familiar surroundings. He argues that moral space corresponds to physical space, emphasising that by orienting ourselves and recognising spatial surroundings, we navigate our understanding and meaning of ourselves. He also states that “we make sense of ourselves through narrative identity” (Renani et al 2022, p. 416). To comprehend ourselves, he suggests, we need to frame our lives as narratives, which requires language for narration, leading to the conclusion that:

What I am as a self, my identity, is essentially defined by the way things have significance for me ...these things have a significance for me, and the issue of my identity is worked out, only through a language of interpretation which I have come to accept as a valid articulation of these issues” (Taylor, 1989, p.93)

He suggests that the concept of self-identity can be understood from two angles: (1) an orientation towards the good and (2) life as a narrative. We require a coherent story to interpret our lives: “In order to have a sense of who we are, we have to have a notion of how we have become and where we

are going” (Renani et al, 2022, p. 416). Life unfolds like a story into which a sense of the good must be integrated. Therefore, the self is a moral entity that defines itself through its values, community, and focus on the good.

Moreover, Taylor offers a philosophical basis for the self that is inherently connected to morality. He sees morality as a set of principles or claims about what one should do or avoid. Rather than viewing morality as just rules, he views it as a framework related to the self. He defines this framework as how a person perceives themselves, which hinges on how they see good and its connection to themselves. Thus, his concept of the self can be understood in terms of good (Kho K P & Kumar, 2022, pp.72-73). Because good shapes the self, it is inherently changeable over time people choose different goods and relate to them in different ways. He maintains that the self cannot be understood apart from good, meaning the self is embodied in good. To clarify the ideas of good, self, and morality, he adopts a religious lens—primarily Catholicism and, to some extent, the Christian philosophical tradition. This suggests that a fundamental transformation of the self is necessary for forming meaningful relationships with God, the world, and the community.

Additionally, he argues that morality is rooted in actual practice. Specifically, he emphasises that morality isn't merely a collection of arguments about expected behaviour; instead, it concerns living well in harmony with God's vision, which includes a sense of dignity and self-respect. These ideals aren't universal principles that philosophers aim to establish. Instead, an individual must develop this vision through experience as they mature. Within their own culture, they encounter these ideals within the community and define them for themselves (Kho K P & Kumar, 2022, p.74).

4. Taylor and MacIntyre: A Comparative Understanding

Both MacIntyre and Taylor align with the communitarian tradition and oppose modern individualism. MacIntyre's moral perspective adopts a conservative, Aristotelian-Thomist approach and criticises liberalism as morally deficient. He sees modern moral culture as fragmented and emotionally driven, where values are based on personal experience. Consequently, he is sceptical of liberal capitalism and the Enlightenment, which dismiss the Aristotelian telos. He advocates for morality modelled on Aristotle, emphasising virtue and community (MacIntyre, 2007, pp. 6-11).

Charles Taylor emphasises that modern self and morality are centred on individualism and authenticity, recognising noble moral origins that have gone astray (Taylor, 1991, pp. 11-12). He advocates navigating and transforming modern liberal democratic life rather than rejecting it entirely. As a result, he maintains a positive outlook on modern morality and the concept of the self, promoting

a hopeful and constructive perspective on modern identity and aiming to redeem liberal democracy and the ethic of authenticity (Taylor, 1991, pp 15-16).

Taylor sees morality as centred on what it is good to be, rather than just what one should or shouldn't do. Notably, Taylor is slightly ahead of Macintyre in defining morality. While Macintyre claims that morality aims at the good life through a neo-Aristotelian approach, Taylor questions what morality itself is, arguing that it depends on the nature of the person or self-striving for that good life (Calhoun, 1991, pp. 232-233).

His concept of self-identity is closely linked to morality; it is formed through and within a moral stance (Calhoun, 1991, p. 233). In this context, Taylor's view of self and morality draws on phenomenological and existential approaches, such as those of Kierkegaard and Heidegger, to define morality. He moved beyond the naturalist approach to morality and introduced a concept of strong moral evaluation (Calhoun, 1991, p. 234).

Charles Taylor advocates for individual autonomy as an ideal, whereas Alasdair MacIntyre offers extensive critiques of modern morality's emotive basis. The contrast between their positions is notable, especially since both originated from similar backgrounds: Catholics, Marxists, and members of the British New Left in the late 1950s. Moreover, both philosophers condemned positivism, atomism, and the emphasis on negative freedom, while highlighting the importance of belonging to a community.

Taylor and MacIntyre argue that the self cannot be seen as an isolated, purely independent entity. Both focus on how history, community, moral traditions, and shared values shape moral identity. However, MacIntyre emphasizes tradition, practices, virtues, and narrative coherence, while Taylor highlights dialogue, recognition, strong evaluation, authenticity, and the evolving moral landscape of modernity. MacIntyre critiques modern liberal individualism and aims to revive an Aristotelian moral framework. In contrast, Taylor adopts a more nuanced view of modernity, acknowledging its moral challenges and opportunities. He offers more emphasis on individual agency and critical reflection, while still recognizing the social and historical influences on the self.

5. Conclusion

This analysis highlights that, while MacIntyre and Taylor often share similar views, they also differ in key ways depending on the context. Both emphasize that the self is fundamentally a social entity, deriving its identity whether as a human or virtuous being—from a particular community, society, or organization. Society exists independently and plays a foundational role in shaping individual character and personality through social moral relations. MacIntyre particularly explores practice,

tradition, and narrative processes (PTN) as the most effective framework for understanding the self and morality.

In contrast, Taylor formulated unique narrative concepts such as a moral framework, the good, the hypergood, and God. He goes further than MacIntyre by particularly highlighting how language and culture shape the understanding of self and morality. Nevertheless, both views of the self and morality are confined by socially experienced boundaries, which in turn influence the growth of both society and the individual self.

Ultimately, this study concludes that while MacIntyre provides a powerful account of the socially embedded and tradition-shaped moral self, Taylor's understanding is more nuanced and better addresses the complexities of contemporary moral life. Taylor's emphasis on dialogue, recognition, authenticity, and the individual's capacity to critically reinterpret inherited moral horizons expands the discussion beyond MacIntyre's stronger dependence on tradition and communal practices. Thus, Taylor does not simply reject MacIntyre's account; rather, his philosophy extends the discussion of the moral self by showing how tradition and community can coexist with autonomy, critical reflection, and changing conceptions of the good. This comparative insight provides a further dimension to contemporary moral philosophy and opens the possibility of developing a more flexible and inclusive account of the moral self.

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