Asylums and Open Institutions: MacIntyre, Goffman and Wiseman on Practice versus Ideology

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Abstract: An examination of the ways in which various thinkers from different traditions – a philosopher, a sociologist and a documentary filmmaker – have each addressed the dichotomy between theory and practice in large social institutions, as well as how such a dichotomy often has a detrimental impact upon the well-being of those functioning within such institutions.

"There is a crack in everything/That's how the light gets in."

- Leonard Cohen, "Anthem"

Alastair MacIntyre is a philosopher who has been critical of the Enlightenment Project and its effects, and has called for a re-examination of the traditions which the Enlightenment sought to supersede, especially the Aristotelian/Thomist tradition. In this paper, I would like to focus upon his pivotal 1984 work, *After Virtue*, and the challenge it presents to the Enlightenment Project. In particular, I wish to examine MacIntyre's views on what he considers to be one of the Enlightenment's most detrimental impacts on present-day society: the dichotomy between our ideals and our social practices, and the almost willful blindness we have towards this disparity. He addresses the growth of a bureaucratic society, initiated to facilitate the implementation of Enlightenment goals: universal education, equal opportunity, health care and constant reform of society. Such a system calls for smooth administration, and it is no wonder that one of the dominant models of the present-day is "the Manager", whose job it is to direct and redirect the resources of such a bureaucracy. The irony is that these organizations often end up doing the exact opposite of what they were set up to accomplish, and decrease rather than increase human well-being, happiness and freedom.

MacIntyre gives a fresh interpretation of the kinds of models which dominate contemporary society, through an historical account of where and how such models have originated. In chapter three of *After Virtue*, he discusses what he calls "characters": paradigms of behavior that dominate and guide societies. They are the moral representatives of their culture, or as he puts it, "the masks worn by moral philosophies."[1] In 19th Century Germany the Prussian Officer, the Professor and the Social Democrat were the dominant characters. In Victorian England, the culture was partially defined by the Public Schoolmaster, the Explorer and the Engineer. Modern American society, he claims, is exemplified by the Rich Aesthete, who has loads of disposable income and knows what to do with it; the Therapist, who helps his/her patients to adjust to society; and the Manager, whose duty it is to be both efficient and profitable in fulfilling the dictates of bureaucratic rationality. The Manager makes sure that offices run efficiently, that everything is in its proper place, and thereby defends the role of dominant institutions which rose to define our working lives. It is interesting to note that many of these institutions (banks, hospitals, universities, welfare offices, psychiatric centers) were created to help human beings. Their origins sprang out of a sort of *philia*, a concern for the well-being of others, and a desire to help them alleviate their problems or increase their opportunities. Yet, in practice, such institutions often have a chilling or dehumanizing effect. Rather than being seen as venues for increasing one's opportunities, they are looked upon with fear and trembling by many who must partake of their services. But the Managers continue to implement policies and fulfill their agendas, regardless. This character morally legitimates a particular mode of social existence: the quest for order and efficiency.

MacIntyre implicitly attributes the growth of the managerial character to the influence of humanism, especially its conscious detachment from sacred scriptures or revealed authorities. Another work which explicitly lays this particular character on the doorstep of humanism is the 1978 book, *The Arrogance of Humanism*, by Rutgers Professor David Ehrenfeld. Ehrenfeld argues that the coupling of naturalism and rationalism found in modern-day humanism, which he thinks has been disproportionately effective, has created a supreme faith in human reason and its ability to solve all problems, whatever they may be. In doing so, a technological society has

arisen, whose purpose is to analysis all events from a cost-benefit perspective. The Baconian assertion "knowledge is power" has become the rallying cry of an increasingly humanized society. Yet, paradoxically, the supreme faith in the scientific method is hastening this society down the road to ruin. A naturalistic apocalypse, predicated on bombs, pollution and a detachment from nature, is on the horizon, yet the bureaucratic madness continues blithely on. He writes:

> *. . . as humanism is committed to an unquestioning faith in the power of reason, so it rejects other assertions of power, including the power of God, the power of supernatural forces, and even the undirected power of Nature in league with blind chance . . . Because human intelligence is the key to human success, the main task of the humanists is to assert its power and protect its prerogatives wherever they are questioned or challenged.*[2]

A new cult of efficiency, that Ehrenfeld asserts was based on humanist principles, arose. This cult infects all manner of social practices: the schoolroom, the workplace, even the bedroom (witness the countless sex manuals which tell you if you're doing it right or not!). Woe to those who do not fit into the proper scheme of things. Ehrenfeld, too, sees the Manager as the dominant character of modern society, but unlike MacIntyre, he considers this to be a *tragic* character, a Willie Loman-like figure doomed to failure. Life is too messy to be organized along rational principles. While *The Arrogance of Humanism* prides itself on being a modern-day Jeremiad (a tradition which MacIntyre should appreciate), Ehrenfeld is not without hope. He postulates that the humanist society may in fact be on the way out. There is one innate force which the Managers, for all their ingenuity, have not been able to eradicate: the human capacity to love. He writes:

> *Another part of the human spirit that might again stand us in good stead is the capacity to love. Not unique to human beings, it is nevertheless of tremendous importance to us, for it is the source of the cohesion of the family and the small community, the only viable inheritors of a post-humanist world. Love . . . is under heavy attack, and the family and small community has weakened perceptibly; unable to survive the inconsistencies and conflicting demands of a humanistic life, they suffer doubly - especially the family - for they are also scapegoats for the*

> *humanist failure to supplant them with something better, or even with something that functions at all.*[3]

Ehrenfeld is not very specific as to how love can combat the threat of institutions or organizations, but it is interesting that he contrasts the capacity to love with humanistic efficiency. In this, he seems to be in accord with MacIntyre's concept of the chief motivational factors of modern society.

MacIntyre devotes a good part of *After Virtue* to examining the ways in which Managers obliterate the distinction between manipulative and non-manipulative social relationships. In his view, morality itself is dependent on maintaining just such distinctions. Yet the Managers, and those they manage, are more often than not unaware that such distinctions are even possible. The public and the private become indistinguishable. Along this line, MacIntyre examines the work of sociologist Erving Goffman (1922-1982), who understood the dichotomy between the roles individuals choose to play, or have imposed upon them, and the meanings these roles actually have. In such works as *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* and *Asylums*, Goffman shows how people adapt themselves in society to pre-conceived roles, and how various institutions support and uphold such roles. The social world which Goffman examines is one quite unlike that of Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics,* where the desire for the regard of others is considered unvirtuous. In Goffman's world, *individuality* is considered a defect, and the goal of life is to fit into pre-existing bureaucratic cubbyholes, ably administered by ever-present Managers.

Another example of the sort of current social practices which MacIntyre is critiquing can be seen in the documentary films of Frederick Wiseman. Wiseman seems to be indebted to Goffman, in that his films address many of the social institutions which Goffman has studied: schools, army training camps, monasteries, hospitals, prisons, and insane asylums. All of these institutions serve a social function, and all of them need Managers to keep them running. Wiseman's films have been ably critiqued in a 1992 book *Voyages of Discovery: The Cinema of Frederick Wiseman*, by Brock University Director of Film Studies, Barry Keith Grant.

Perhaps Wiseman's most controversial film is the first one he directed, *Titicut Follies* (1967), which has only recently has been made available to the general public.[4]

It was not until July, 1991 that a court injunction against its public showing was lifted. Before this time, the only people allowed to view the film were health professionals, educators, counselors and others who had a demonstrated expertise in the field of mental health (an ironic state of affairs, given the content of the film).

Titicut Follies is a documentary detailing a few days at the Bridgewater, Massachusetts Hospital for the Criminally Insane. "Titicut" is the Indian name for the area, and the follies were an annual event put on jointly by the staff and inmates to boost morale. State officials allowed Wiseman free access to the facility. Indeed, the officials, who put no restrictions on him, felt that the film would demonstrate just what a model institution Bridgewater was, and would help to get it increased funding from state and federal authorities. From its opening scene, in which a dispirited assembly of patients sings an off-key version of "Strike Up the Band", the viewer quickly surmises that the film's jolly title will have little correspondence with the events to follow. Scenes of brutalization, ineptness and bureaucratic unconcern are the norm. For instance, one catatonic patient is force-fed while the doctor performing the act nonchalantly smokes a cigarette directly over the feeding tube.

At times the film seems almost like a parody, yet it is quite real. In another Kafka-esque sequence, an inmate argues with the staff psychiatrist that he should be released from the institution and sent back to prison, where he had more freedom. The doctor tells him that if he is released, he will just end up right back at the asylum in a short time. When the inmate remonstrates, the doctor replies that if he is mistaken, "you can spit in my face." The patient sensibly asks, "Why should I do that?" and the viewer wonders if the two roles have not somehow been reversed. What is amazing is that the managers of Bridgewater, both internal and external, did not seem to notice or be concerned by the nightmarish quality of the institution. It was only *after* the film was near release, and criticisms of what it showed became known, that they protested, and initiated a court case that lasted for years. It is ironic that the film itself, rather than the events it depicted, became the focus of legal proceedings.

Wiseman has stated that his films give "a natural history of the way we live", and that his intention in these films is to reveal the gaps between an institution's stated goals and its practice.[5] While he began making films out of an urge for social reform, he soon

lost his faith in the ability of his films to change opinions or practices. He does not consider them to be exposés, and doubts that they have much if any effect in changing managerial ways. "I naively thought that all you had to do was show people how horrible a place was and something would be done about it," he once said. "I learned from *Titicut Follies* that this is not the case."[6] As Grant points out, Wiseman's more recent films tend to focus on institutions function, as opposed to his earlier films like *Hospital* and *High School*, which focused on disfunctioning institutions. Still, a recurrent theme of Wiseman's work has been the dichotomy between ideology and actual practice, and the ways in which that dichotomy is either willfully or unwittingly ignored.

Wiseman and Goffman, through their different venues, show bureaucracy at its very worst: the blindness to cruelty, the inability or unwillingness to see that programs are not working and the tendency to keep the programs moving come what may. They ably demonstrate the alienating effect such a disparity between practice and ideology can have. Goffman in particular, like MacIntyre, was fascinated by the growth of organizational constructs, and the way they often subsume their original purposes, burying good intentions under a plethora of rules. He was also interested in the manner in which individuality still remains, and often defies various institutions' intents. One particular area he studied was so-called "total institutions", which are shut off from the outside world. Goffman noted that one can classify institutions according to the degree to which they are "closed" or "open" to public view. Total institutions tend to have amazingly similar characteristics. In his book *Asylums*, Goffman gives a rich description of the social practices of these institutions, and sees three conditioning elements: absence of outside evaluation, rationalization of practices and disciplinary control of those who disobey such practices. He is interested in the sense of inevitability of these institutions, an inevitability which was not in evidence when these institutions first arose. To keep functioning efficiently, these institutions seek to inculcate a sense of shared values among the managers and the managed. Tom Burns, author of a recent study of Goffman's work, describes the book *Asylums* thusly:

> All organizations, Goffman claims, seek to impose an identity on their members, allocating to each of them a character and a conception of self

which is consonant with the organization's values, requirements and expectations.[7]

Still, the question arises: Is it fair to attribute this relentless organizing mechanism to the tradition of humanism? Is Ehrenfeld right when he states that humanism is synonymous with modernity, and modern society has opted for a mechanistic framework, based upon predictable results and clear-cut objectives? He himself points out that there have been humanists, such as Lewis Mumford, who were themselves critical of such a framework. In addition, it is hard to think of an organization which better fits Goffman's model of control than that of organized religion - the very sort of organization which humanism both criticizes and attempts to replace.

MacIntyre has shown that quite often those within a social practice are unable to see its flaws. They are blinded by their own ideals, and cannot distance themselves enough to see if their practices really do accord with these ideals. No doubt this is why Wiseman is time and again invited to film at various institutions, with free access and complete editorial control: the Managers in question quite sincerely believe they have nothing to hide, and are shocked by the shock of the documentaries' viewers. This is itself an argument for a pluralistic society, of sometimes competing, sometimes cooperating traditions. Rather than attempting to have one all-controlling, all-purpose institution promoting a single way of life a pluralistic society allows for differing groups to in a sense watch over each other. Yet MacIntyre begins and ends *After Virtue* on a note of despair, bemoaning the loss of the Aristotelian/Thomistic tradition and the fragmentation of modern society. The best that he can hope for is the construction of local forms of communities which might revive this tradition, far from the madding crowds.

MacIntyre's thorough-going historicism makes one more sensitive to the origins of moral traditions, and his relentless focusing on social practices should keep us alert as to whether or not those traditions are still viable. He is particularly good at demonstrating the tension that exists within the humanist tradition between its naturalistic and rationalistic strands. It would be a pity, therefore, if he actually tried to put into practice his own call for a retreat into self-contained moral communities. It is

especially important for differing communities to maintain some sort of dialogue, not just for the health of a pluralistic society but for their own health. As Goffman and Wiseman each make evident, the dangers of total institutionalization are great for all communities, whatever their initial ideals may have been.

Still, we should also realize that, even though we might come from different cultures, traditions or races, we are not a different species from one another - we can still interact successfully with each other, and at times breed together. So, even if MacIntyre is right that our current condition is one of fragmented, incommensurable moral traditions, there is *still* hope for love among the ruins.

NOTES

[1]Alastair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984) 28.

[2]David Ehrenfeld, *The Arrogance of Humanism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981) 5-6.

[3]*Arrogance,*. 267.

[4] See the website www.zipporah.com for information on how to order this and other Wiseman films.

[5]Barry Keith Grant, *Voyages of Discovery: The Cinema of Frederick Wiseman* (Urbana and Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992) 26. See also Carolyn Anderson and Thomas W. Benson, *Documentary Dilemmas: Frederick Wiseman's* Titicut Follies (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991).

[6]*Voyages*., 29.

[7]Tom Burns, *Erving Goffman* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 155.