

# 'Alastair Macintyre on the moral-instrumental division of the modern world'

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I am reading Alasdair MacIntyre's [\*After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory\*](#) (1981), and I've just come across a passage that is related to my recent argument about the problems of the use of the concept of neoliberalism in anthropology.

Part of my argument was that academic advocates of neoliberalism and academic critics of it share a view of the world, for all their apparent disagreement, in which all action is *either* moral *or* instrumental. I argued that this was part of a long argument in western thought that took the division for granted and in which the problematic was what the proper balance between the two spheres of life should be, and that neither position can adequately comprehend forms of moral life in which effective instrumentality is considered to have intrinsic ethical value.

MacIntyre's book historicizes this very distinction, attributing its emergence to the attempt of Enlightenment thinkers to justify morality, and looks at historical forms of virtue in which the good and the effective were unified. MacIntyre's target is not, of course, 'neoliberalism-ism', but a theory of morality he describes as emotivism. He argues that emotivism dominates moral thought in the contemporary world.

Emotivism, according to MacIntyre, is premised on the division of the social world into,

...a realm of the organizational in which ends are taken to be given and are not available for rational scrutiny and a realm of the personal in which judgment and debate about values are central factors, but in which no rational social resolution of issues is available...

...debates are often staged in terms of a supposed opposition between individualism and collectivism, each appearing in a variety of doctrinal forms. On the one side there appear the self-defined protagonists of individual liberty, on the other the self-defined protagonists of planning and regulation, of the goods which are available through bureaucratic organization. But in fact what is crucial is that on which the contending parties agree, namely that there are only two alternative modes of social life open to us, one in which the free and arbitrary choices of individuals are sovereign and one in which the bureaucracy is sovereign, precisely so it may limit the free and arbitrary choices of individuals (p. 34f).