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Alasdair MacIntyre: A Critic Of Modernity

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Abstract: The article provides an account of some aspects of Alasdair MacIntyre's moral and political critique of liberal modernity. It reconstructs major concepts of his moral theory, i.e. his concept of the virtues, of a 'practice', of a 'narrative unity of a human life', of 'external' and 'internal' goods, and of a moral 'tradition'. It then gives an account of his project of a politics of local community. The article argues that MacIntyre's critique is a Thomist moral and political project, which understands the relation of the individual to the community in ways difficult to reconcile with the contemporary conception of the person, of individual rights and of the relation of the individual to the state.

Keywords: Alasdair MacIntyre, modernity, community, virtue, Thomism.

1. Alasdair MacIntyre: A Critic of Modernity

Alasdair MacIntyre's theory of the virtues, his book *After Virtue* (1981), and his influential work on many fields of philosophical theory are well known. His contribution to philosophy develops in political theory, ethics, metaphysics, and the history of philosophy. Alasdair MacIntyre has been an active intellectual figure since the 1950s. He is now considered a preeminent Thomist philosopher, although he started his intellectual journey as a Marxist political thinker. One of the distinctive ideas that runs through his work is his critique of liberalism, which is also a critique of the Enlightenment and of capitalism. It constitutes a political and moral criticism of contemporary liberal culture and a call for return to the ethics of virtue and community.

His work is mainly considered an Aristotelian criticism of modernity, containing strong Thomistic strands throughout his moral and political theory. MacIntyre's project is against liberal capitalism, both in its social and political institutions and its morality. His effort to reintroduce Thomist ethical and political concepts and alter social and political institutions is a part of that project. MacIntyre's critique of liberalism draws on an ideal of political community which resembles to the monastic communities of the Middle Ages. He calls for a return to the ethics and politics of the common good, as opposed to the liberal politics of rights. He understands ancient morality, which his ethical and political project seeks to restore, as superior to contemporary liberal morality. He believes that the project of restoration of traditional communities he introduces is the first step to retrieve such a morality.

MacIntyre's early political thought had been under the influence of Marxism. He became critical of Marxism in the 1960s and headed towards developing a Thomistic ethical theory from the 1980s onwards.

MacIntyre sees contemporary politics as based on Weberian rationality, which has been transformed to bureaucratic competence. In his view, modern democracies

are characterized by managerial effectiveness and are inimical to values. They pursue given goals, such as liberal neutrality, which has become another liberal value which is considered undisputable. They seek to maximize the power exercised over their citizens, who are not allowed to question that kind of relation between citizens and political authority.

For MacIntyre, morality and philosophy are socially derived. They are connected to particular societies and eras. His programme for ethics and politics is, nevertheless, Thomist in origin and spirit, containing, as he argues, Aristotelian elements. MacIntyre claims that he succeeds in reviving Thomist and Aristotelian elements in his ethical and political theory, in a new context, suitable for contemporary societies.

In this article, some of the elements of that effort are critically presented. The first section of the article sets the background of the argument of his moral critique. The following section reconstructs the main schemes presented in his book *After Virtue*, where MacIntyre re-introduces some Aristotelian concepts, seen from the perspective of his critique of liberalism. The last section describes his moral and political project of local communities, where practices and virtues may be restored, and makes some remarks on the viability of his project in modernity.

2. *After Virtue*: A Journey from Homeric Virtue to Liberalism and back to the Virtues

In the beginning of his best-known work, *After Virtue*, MacIntyre famously describes an imaginary state of catastrophe where natural science has been destroyed, scientists are being persecuted and there are only fragments of the past situation. In order to restore science, the remaining scientists and educated people try to put together all the fragments of the past. Pieces of theories, book chapters, broken equipment, all are combined in an effort to restore science at its prior state. But that effort is necessarily inconsistent since all major parts of previous scientific

achievements have been lost. Therefore, all scientists are in a position of continuous disagreement since the remaining pieces of scientific theories are damaged and all major theories have been partially lost.¹

MacIntyre draws a parallel of that imaginary situation with the contemporary state of affairs in modern societies. When it comes to morality, its state and language suffer the same disorder as natural science in the fictional example above.² Although liberalism boasts that it has the most sound moral reasoning, moral disagreement persists, and individuals are in a moral chaos as though no rationality exists. Moral theory and politics are in a state of constant disagreement and seem to have reached an impasse. Everyone seems able to produce a rational argument, therefore he believes he has the truth. There is no way to adjudicate between conflicting arguments. The reason for this, MacIntyre believes, is because the pieces of philosophical theory, and of moral and political argument, are detached from the social and moral background they had in preliberal societies. Without that background, morality and politics are necessarily fragmented and incoherent, and evolve into a state of conflict. But, as in the above example of the disaster in natural science, no one realises that situation, therefore he adheres to the rationality of his own argument.

MacIntyre states examples where the fact of endless and unresolvable disagreement happens not only in common moral matters but also in academic disputes over political issues, such as justice. Philosophers adhere to positions such as the theories of John Rawls and Robert Nozick, they can develop their own arguments, supporting the one justice theory or the other, but they cannot come to a conclusion as to which of the two theories is valid. For MacIntyre, that would require a shared agreement of what constitutes good for man, in other words a common conception of the good. Since a common conception of the good is absent in modernity, moral disagreement is bound to continue. Modernity understands morality as a concept based on the

¹ MacIntyre, A., 2007: 1.

² MacIntyre, A., 2007: 256.

autonomy of the individual and on his/her free choice, therefore modern morality cannot be construed on the basis of agreement. Political and moral matters in modernity are the cause of continuous debate, where everyone is trying to convince everybody else. Everyone experiences inability to convince the other rationally, since all arguments claim rationality. The result is continuous strife and indignation. Since all arguments are supposed to be rational, all attempts to convince others, do not use rationality but emotions and manipulation. It appears that liberalism's obsession with rationality ends up with an irrational morality.

The way the individual chooses his moral stance is also irrational. Although liberalism contends that free moral choice is a main aspect of liberal morality, it cannot justify a meaningful moral paradigm based on individual choice that is not relativistic. Moral agents in modernity cannot justify their commitments. For MacIntyre, all moral stances in modernity are arbitrary, because there is not a set of underlying values which would necessarily support each moral position.³ It is thus certain that everyone may change his moral commitments, according to his own interests. Since conditions in modernity change rapidly, agents may have variable and fluid interests, depending on the circumstances. The main concept in modernity is not the object of choice, and the values which underlie it, but the subject of choice, the moral agent, and his/her interests. There is no connection of moral choice to a conception of the good that would provide a coherent rational background of that choice.

For MacIntyre, a morality presupposes a sociology. Liberalism cannot admit that fact of moral theory and practice, because of its individualistic premises.⁴ Liberal morality reveals what MacIntyre calls 'emotivism', i.e. 'the doctrine that all evaluative judgements are nothing but expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling, insofar as they are moral or evaluative in character'.⁵ In liberal modernity, our values and beliefs can be nothing more

³ MacIntyre, A., 2007: 39.

⁴ MacIntyre, A., 2007: 23-24.

⁵ MacIntyre, A., 2007: 11-12.

than the outcome of our choosing what is best for us and what seems more rational for the chooser to follow, for his/her own purposes. After choosing their own moral stance, moral agents then try to convert others to their own views and beliefs. The strength of their own moral view is assessed by the number of people they can persuade.

What for MacIntyre is a predicament of contemporary morality, for liberalism is an ideal of an autonomous, free chooser, who rationally determines his/her ends and conceptions of the good. For modern morality, the individual is prior to his/her social milieu or roles, since the individual is considered prior to his/her ends. For MacIntyre, liberalism also neglects the historical dimension of moral choice. Although all values and ends are historical, a conception that captures the essence of human morality and action, liberalism contends that there are ahistorical values, such as the priority of the individual and rights.

3. 'Practices', 'Narrative Unity', 'Goods' and 'Tradition'

MacIntyre contrasts the ethics of emotivism to his own project of an ethics of virtue and community. He describes his view of a rational morality as an Aristotelian ethics of the virtues. Virtue ethics evolve around a conception of the good, while liberal morality is an ethics of rights and individualism. The concept of the virtues can provide an account of what is the good for man. It can also give an account of what constitutes a human good in various circumstances. The virtues can therefore accommodate historicity within morality.

MacIntyre connects the concept of the virtues to what is the good for someone, according to his/her social role. Virtue ethics can, thus, provide a more adequate account of what is the good for man. It can also give a better account of what is the good for the social roles he occupies, compared to liberal ethics whose main concept is the individual and his ability for rational choice. Liberalism is individualistic and cannot

provide a framework for what is the good for the individual who functions within social roles.

Although virtues can give a historical account of what is the human good, there is a framework common to all eras, which provides three levels of the concept of the virtues. They are the levels of a 'practice', of the 'narrative unity of the human life' and of the 'moral tradition'. Each level is based on the level before it.

The concept of a 'practice' has a specific meaning, used by MacIntyre to denote a 'coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realised 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'.⁶ Participation in a practice means that the agent has to adhere to certain rules internal to that practice. Those rules claim objectivity, derived from the specific way that activity functions and reproduces itself over time.

Inside those practices there are certain kinds of goods attached. These goods are of two kinds. The first kind is what MacIntyre calls 'external' goods, such as prestige, status and money. They can be obtained not only by participating in that specific practice, but by lots of alternative ways. The other kind is 'internal' goods and refers to the goods which can be obtained only by engaging in that specific kind of practice.⁷

Most structured, organised human activities in modernity are not practices, in the sense that MacIntyre understands them, because they don't function according to the human good. The goods attached to most of the human practices in liberal modernity are 'external' goods. The politics of liberal modernity are characteristically such a practice. They do not

⁶ MacIntyre, A., 2007: 187.

⁷ In his next book, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (1988), MacIntyre refers to 'internal' and 'external' goods as 'goods of excellence' and 'goods of effectiveness'. MacIntyre, A., 1988: 32.

promote the common good but mostly the goods of those prominent in that activity. In liberal politics, the goods that prevail are the external goods of money and power. In general, practices are either absent in modernity, or they are dominated by external goods. But the example of politics is indicative of the corrosion of practices in modernity, since politics should be the human activity mostly connected to the human good.

Only by participating in the specific kind of goods of a practice, are we able to understand and identify them in that practice. Its goods can be achieved only if, at first, one subordinates him/herself, while participating in that activity with other practitioners. At the beginning, one has to put him/herself under the authority of others, more experienced than him/her, for guidance, in learning the rules and skills necessary for that practice. In a practice, one competes with the other, as a necessary step in order for the goods of practices to develop and thrive. The rules that define the goods inherent in a practice may be changed by the community itself, in order to improve and strengthen the practice. But practices have a certain history, which is always respected, although parts of it may be altered. A practice cannot move forward in the future, if it does not build on the rules of the past. It can then develop new rules that become part of the tradition of that specific practice.

Since rules are inherent to practices, there is a need to find a way to adjudicate between conflicting practices. Every human life is a quest for the good and it also constitutes a narrative. Everyone is the main character in the narrative of his/her life, a fact that gives it a unity, the unity of a narrative quest. In the 'narrative unity of a human life', that quest for the good gives life its unity and meaning.

For MacIntyre, practices are important because virtues can be exercised only within practices. In order to achieve goods that are internal to practices, one needs the presence of the virtues. MacIntyre gives a definition of the virtues in terms of their interrelation with practices: 'A virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and the exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to

practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods'.⁸ The virtues of 'justice, courage and honesty' are necessary components of all practices with 'internal' goods. Virtues need the environment of a practice to exist. There can be no virtues without a common conception of what the good is and without common ends and rules practised in a shared social environment.

Practices are created and exercised only within a moral 'tradition'. A tradition is '...an historically extended, socially embedded argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition. Within a tradition the pursuit of goods extends through generations....Hence the individual's search for his or her good is generally and characteristically conducted within a context defined by those traditions of which the individual's life is a part...'.⁹ Liberalism, Thomism, and the Scottish Enlightenment are such traditions, understood in the way MacIntyre introduces that meaning of the word. Individual lives can be lived only within traditions. Moral traditions are moral arguments extending over time. Modernity is itself a moral tradition, and it is because it lacks a common conception of the good, that it ends up denying the validity of all moral values. Morality in modernity leads to the Nietzschean rejection of all values.

Because of his allegiance to the virtues, MacIntyre's project is often understood as Aristotelian, an interpretation often enhanced by his reference to virtues as an alternative to the contemporary predicament of liberal morality. But as early as in his *After Virtue*, MacIntyre had stated his view that Aristotelian ethics are interrelated with the ancient polis and cannot be revived.¹⁰ For MacIntyre, it is only the moral tradition of Thomism that can provide an alternative to liberalism.

⁸ MacIntyre, A., 2007: 191.

⁹ MacIntyre, A., 2007: 222.

¹⁰ MacIntyre, A., 2007: 159.

4. Towards a politics of the virtues

For MacIntyre, contemporary liberal culture is inimical to the notion of commitment to a conception of the good essential for a full, meaningful life. Liberalism concentrates on the idea of rights and how individual rights, or rights of groups, can be protected. Citizens do not reflect on which is the best way of life for human beings, or what is the best kind of human society. They do not search for ways to develop their personality and their relationship to their political community. Citizens of contemporary democracies are inimical to the concept of virtue. They are not willing to consider how the virtues can provide them with a way to flourish, individually and collectively.

Liberalism believes that issues of moral personality and of the good life are solely issues of individual conduct and do not involve any relation of the individual to the community. For liberal morality, the community should not have any claims about conceptions of the good life and about the morality of the individual. Liberalism is devoted to neutrality, a value it promotes in the private and the public sphere. For MacIntyre, neutrality ends up being another conception of the good, which liberalism promotes as a neutral stance. In modernity, every individual has his/her own conception of the good, in which the state cannot interfere. Therefore, no one can adjudicate between rival versions of the good life. Liberal neutrality is the first step towards the consolidation of a conception of politics as managerial authority over citizens.

Liberal rationality is rationality stripped of its ends. For politics of local community, rationality is not opposed to conceptions of the good life. Rationality does not undermine, but supports conceptions of the good. Rationality can exist only within practices, which are always socially constituted. Practices can thrive only within communities. MacIntyre understands communities as the political form that can provide the necessary milieu for the revival of political activity and of morality. In those communities practices and

the virtues can be revived. They can provide an alternative social model to liberal capitalism.

MacIntyre understands the politics of liberal modernity as also being in grave disorder, following the predicament of contemporary morality. The liberal conception of self and society is one of separations between individual and community. The politics of practices and virtues, which are practised in small communities, are completely different from the politics of the modern state. The locality of that particular political form, and its special characteristics, may transform the nature of political activity and its known predicament in mass liberal democracies. It is 'a politics of self-defence for all those local societies that aspire to achieve some relatively self-sufficient and independent form of participatory practice-based community'.¹¹

Contemporary democracies resemble more to oligarchies of money and power, where the powerful few rule over the rest of the citizens. That kind of politics is combined with a morality inimical to the flourishing of the virtues. The politics of local community may introduce a completely different relation of the citizen to political power. Through political activity, citizens are educated into political participation, while they also develop their moral character. In contemporary, conventional forms of politics, participants have to be adaptable, constantly changing their positions, while in the politics of local community, they will grow solid and coherent moral personalities, since one of the key virtues in local politics is integrity. As a result, citizens will also develop a completely different relation to their political representatives.¹²

After his critique of liberal morality in the early 1980s, when at the final pages of *After Virtue*, MacIntyre famously called for 'another St. Benedict', he has given various exemplifications of his view on community. In the Prologue to the third edition of his aforementioned major work, he describes the aspects of St. Benedict's life and work that MacIntyre himself was intrigued by. MacIntyre refers to 'a

¹¹ MacIntyre, A., 1995: xxvi.

¹² MacIntyre, A., 1998: 249.

monastery of prayer, learning, and labor, in which, and around which communities could not only survive, but flourish in a period of social and cultural darkness'.¹³ That kind of institution had 'unpredictable effects' in St. Benedict's time, and MacIntyre claims that our time is also waiting 'for new and unpredictable possibilities of renewal', in order to resist the dominant order of liberal modernity. In those communities, members can 'recognize that obedience to those standards that Aquinas identified as the precepts of the natural law is necessary, if they are to learn from and with each other what their individual and common goods are.... In such a society the authority of positive law, promulgated by whatever means the community adopts, will derive from its conformity to the precepts of natural law and from the acknowledgement of that conformity by plain persons'.¹⁴

It is doubtful whether such a conception of the citizen and his/her relation to the community is viable today, where the separation of the private from the public sphere is considered an essential feature of individualism in modernity. Values such as autonomy of the person and respect for individual rights in contemporary liberal societies understand individual flourishing as a personal project. The state is not allowed to interfere with a person's right to rationally choose his/her way of life. MacIntyre's vision of local participatory communities remains a small-scale, partial project within large-scale contemporary democracies. His project of a recovery of the virtues contains dubious notions, concerning the relation of the individual to the community.

¹³ MacIntyre, A., 2007: xvi.

¹⁴ MacIntyre, A., 1998: 247.

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