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## **A Critique of MacIntyre's Self-Correction Attempt: A Better Metaphysical Grounding?**

*Abstract:* MacIntyre's significant contribution to moral and political theory stresses the crucial importance of the frameworks in which concepts such as virtue are engendered and sustained. Nevertheless, his theory does not sufficiently explain how the different frameworks provide rational or even metaphysical criteria that guide moral action. While MacIntyre argues for the transcendent nature of virtues against anti-metaphysical emotivism, he defends virtue through an immanent conception of human ends. Moreover, due to his emphatic but nearly standardless conception of practices and traditions, MacIntyre risks falling into moral relativism, a modern trait that he undertakes to challenge.

*Key words:* MacIntyre, self-correction, virtue theory, immanentism

*Povzeteke:* **Kritika MacIntyrejevega poskusa samopopravka: Boljša metafizična podlaga?**

MacIntyer znatno prispeva k moralni in politični teoriji s tem, da poudari bistveni pomen okvirov, v katerih koncepti, kakor je vrlina, nastanejo in se ohranjajo. Vendar njegova teorija nezadostno razloži, kako ti razni okviri priskrbijo racionalne ali celo metafizične kriterije, ki bi utemeljevali moralna dejanja. Medtem ko MacIntyre po eni strani zagovarja presežno naravo kreposti nasproti metafiziki neprijaznemu emotivizmu, po drugi strani utemeljuje vrlino prek imanentne zasnove človeških ciljev. Še več, zaradi svoje skoraj brezriterijske zasnove praks in tradicij tvega MacIntyure prevzem moralnega relativizma, to je tiste značilnosti moderne, kateri sam nasprotuje.

*Ključne besede:* MacIntyre, samopopravek, teorija vrlin, imanentizem

In *After Virtue* (1981; 1984; 2007), Alasdair MacIntyre characterizes modern moral philosophy as being incapable of accounting for virtue, of providing rational standards to ethical theory, and of linking moral behaviour to society and tradition. Fiercely critiquing elements of modernity such as individualism, emotivism, and relativism, MacIntyre reopens the possibility of an understanding of common moral agreement aiming at the good. He offers an account of ethical theory based on a conception of virtue that is linked to social life and tradition. Nevertheless, while MacIntyre argues for the transcendent nature of virtues against anti-me-

taphysical emotivism, he defends virtue through an immanent conception of human ends. Moreover, due to his emphatic but nearly standardless conception of practices and traditions, MacIntyre risks falling into moral relativism, a modern trait that he undertakes to challenge.

In his Prologue to the Third Edition to *After Virtue* (2007), MacIntyre brusquely and hastily confesses this shortcoming by saying that at the time of writing *After Virtue*, he was already an Aristotelian but not yet a Thomist. He writes that the argument of *After Virtue* was inadequate until he »provided it with a metaphysical grounding« (2007, xi) Despite this self-critique, MacIntyre's major subsequent works such as *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (1988) and *Dependent Rational Animals* (1999) do not supply a »metaphysical grounding« to better support his defense of practices and traditions. In order to defend this criticism, this essay first presents both the claims MacIntyre is attacking and his own solutions.

## 1. MacIntyre: Modernity's Fragmented Moral Claims

MacIntyre claims in *After Virtue* that the ethical theory and practice of today are incomprehensible. Modern morality possesses only »*simulacra* of morality,« i.e., a series of fragmented survivals. This fragmentation is a result of a particular »catastrophe,« which consists in the loss of a rational grounding of morality.

The culprit for this catastrophe is modernity, most visibly embodied in the doctrine of emotivism. For emotivists, metaphysical and value statements are a matter of personal preference and have no objective validity. Concepts of »good,« for instance, can no longer rationally orient a moral action since rationality cannot be based on personal preference alone. As one cannot define the term »good« but only explain the usage of this term, good can be intuited at best (Moore 1903; Ayer 1936). This leads MacIntyre to reproach modernity with the loss of one of the three basic pillars of classical ethical theories. Aristotle, for example, understood ethical theory as built upon, (1) the moral agent in his untutored human condition, (2) moral agent as he could be if he realized his *telos*, and (3) moral rules that facilitate the passage from first stage to the second. Modernity rejects the second pillar since the normative concept of *telos* can not inform the question of good and the society. The shared good, beneficial for all the members of the community, has to disappear or adopt alternative forms for one can neither objectively say what is good nor can one comprehend a moral agent's true end. As a result, the questions of the good life become »unsettleable« from the perspective of a common good (Dworkin 2011; Wagner 2003, 125).

The problems resulting from the fragmentation of moral statements cannot be resolved so long as the catastrophic fragmentation is not understood. To come to such an understanding, MacIntyre suggests both a return to the situation of the person, who has no allegiance to a particular tradition (i.e., the modern person), and, subsequently, a »transformation« of such a person (cf. *Whose Justice? Whi-*

ch Rationality?). Personal transformation would allow the recognition that all moral statements derive from some particular tradition. This recognition would further allow a »conversion,« to a particular tradition (cf. *Idem*).

## 2. MacIntyre's Incomplete Response to Emotivism

MacIntyre responds to emotivism by pointing to a variety of different and internally coherent traditions that can provide rational standards for moral acting. In *After Virtue* he argues that Aristotelianism proves to be more insightful than other moral theories because it relies on the *telos* of a practice and of the whole human life. The reasons for choosing the Aristotelian position, however, are broader than Aristotle's theory itself. MacIntyre argues that we cannot think and act from »a standpoint external to all tradition« (1988, 369). In fact, the bases of adequate rationality are available only in and through traditions. In other words, in order to comprehensively defend a particular ethical theory through rationally established criteria of moral behavior, it is necessary for a thinker to accept a particular socially and historically embedded tradition.

Despite his insistence on the rationality of criteria, in none of his three major works does MacIntyre respond to the question of who or what is the precise source of the criteria that regulate the social life. MacIntyre does, in fact, not fully resolve the problem of how to reach absolute truth from a historically and socially limited position. He suggests that attention to history itself may reveal the superiority of one tradition over another with respect to a given topic. In *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, for instance, he claims that a history of a particular tradition provides a way of identifying a justification which is able to support whatever claims to »truth« that are made within it. Implicit or explicit references to such contexts are therefore necessary. With this position, MacIntyre comes close to the recognition of a metaphysical grounding of practices and traditions, since this position points to a comprehensivity of assumptions and stipulations of each of the major philosophical traditions. However, MacIntyre then concludes with a striking statement: »The concept of truth, however, is timeless« (363).

One could defend MacIntyre by arguing that these positions are claims about epistemology. What MacIntyre would then seem to argue is that in all main traditions, there are underlying assumptions about the nature of reason, and therefore, that there is no independent rational ground for ethical theories to stand on. The reason for the modern project to have failed is precisely the attempt to find an independent appeal to reason. However, in MacIntyre, there is no other convincing claim to universalism or transcendence – apart from his socially constructed account of rationality, which is nevertheless always particular – than the claim to community based on the notion of nature. What MacIntyre's system lacks is an account of rationality that would provide clear standards, enabling a given community to tend toward a common good, recognized within an on-going tradition. An example of the lack of standards in MacIntyre's quest for rationality is his account of virtues.

In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre first defines virtue in Aristotelian terms. Virtue is a quality that by a rational activity enables the moral agent to achieve his purpose or *telos*. For Aristotle, happiness or human flourishing can be achieved only by practicing virtues. Happiness is virtue in action. Later, however, MacIntyre links the notion of virtue not only to *eudaimonia* and to rational standards derived from *telos* (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*) but also to the understanding of what he calls »(internal) practices«, a notion that will enable him to relate virtue ethics to a community. It is this notion of »internal practices,« moreover, that exposes MacIntyre to relativist positions. When MacIntyre claims that virtues are internal to practices, he understands practices merely as a »socially« established human activity. It is only through an activity thus (i.e., socially) understood, that goods, which are internal to a particular form of activity, could be realized. Practice and, consequently, virtue can be only understood within tradition. Differently put, practical reasoning that originates in exercising virtues is always made with others and within a framework of social relationships (cf. *Dependent Rational Animals*, particularly MacIntyre's discussion on dolphins). In this sense, the good pursued by an individual is also pursuing the good of others and together with them.

However, precisely because the social context plays a dominant role, MacIntyre's concept of virtue proves not to be fixed to a transcendent and metaphysical conception of good in neither *After Virtue* nor any subsequent MacIntyre's work. Virtue is socially adaptable and modifiable according to the »ongoing« tradition and thus subject to a potentially substantive change. Moreover, MacIntyre's account of virtue does not rely on any explicit rational standards. Instead of defining rationality, MacIntyre bases his thought on communal standards and actions, which risk to vary without a standard from community to community. In other words, in MacIntyre, the defense of rationality comes – apart from his socially constructed account of rationality – from the reference to a community. But is a community a sufficient answer to the question of the transcendence and rationality of human ends?

### 3. Conclusion

By overemphasizing the socially constructed aspect of virtues, MacIntyre finds himself close to a relativist position. He provides no clear rational standards for moral acting. On the one hand, he emphasizes that these standards can only come from a particular tradition, yet, on the other, he never defines them. While MacIntyre makes an important contribution to moral and political theory by stressing the crucial importance of the frameworks (tradition, practices, history, context) in which our concepts are engendered and sustained, he does not fully explain how the different frameworks can provide rational or even metaphysical criteria that guide moral action. What is ultimately lacking from MacIntyre's account is a theory of virtue rooted in a rationality by which practices and traditions themselves could be judged.

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