

# The Challenge of Multiculturalism: Universalism and Particularism in Alasdair MacIntyre's Ethics

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## 1. MacIntyre and Multiculturalism

The fundamental questions of multiculturalism and ethics regarding the issues of universalism and particularism are quite clear: Is it possible, and how so, to bring together different concepts of ethics and moral beliefs of different cultures in one society? Can moral conflicts between different cultures be solved and can there be rational dispute about ethics between different cultures? Can there be found commonalities, or a universal standing ground?

On the first glance of *After Virtue*, MacIntyre's claim that there is no possibility of a rational solution to such conflicts, because there are no rational criteria independent of tradition (cf. MacIntyre 1995, 366 f.)<sup>1</sup>, seems strongly relativistic. Here one could leave aside the topic of multiculturalism and ethics, and affiliate oneself to MacIntyre's pessimistic analysis of the disastrous state of modern moral debates, which he describes in the first chapters of *After Virtue*. However,

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<sup>1</sup> "So it is possible for one such tradition to defeat another in respect of the adequacy of its claims to truth and to rational justification, even though there are no neutral standards available by appeal to which any rational agent whatsoever could determine which tradition is superior to which" (MacIntyre 2007, Prologue xiii).

it is also the claim that his account does not account for relativism,<sup>2</sup> which urges us to make a closer examination of his account. He claims that a rejection of the modern (Marxist and liberal Individualistic) “ethos” can supply us with a rational and moral position (meaning a traditional virtue ethics), from which one can judge and act, and on which grounds one is able to evaluate several rival moral systems. (cf. MacIntyre 1995, 10) If the last claim is right, why is there no way of solving conflicts between different cultures? If it’s not, why should one bother engaging with MacIntyre’s ethical theory? In the context of the above mentioned claims the question arises as to whether MacIntyre’s theory is able to cope with the conditions of a multicultural society, or not.

For the purpose of answering this question I will presuppose that a multicultural society, i.e. the cohabitation of different cultures in a society (be it a Canadian “salad bowl” or an American “melting pot”) or the clash of different cultures in global space, needs some kind of universal approach towards ethics, that is either independent from culture or is at least open to intercultural commonalities. “Universalism” in this context means the general applicability and intercultural communication and comprehension of ethical theories. “Particularism” refers to an understanding of ethics that only applies to or derives from a specific context or can be understood by a specific group (e.g. a “culture”).

In the attempt to explore whether MacIntyre is able to answer any of the questions that multiculturalism poses for ethics, this essay will analyse the tension between particularistic and universalistic parts of MacIntyre’s approach, which can already be seen in the conflict highlighted between the above mentioned claims. The analysis in this essay does not claim to be exhaustive, but it will focus on some prominent points in the debate and aims to be sufficiently comprehensive to allow a critique of MacIntyre in support of the claim that the usefulness of MacIntyre’s theory for multicultural questions is limited.

The essay begins by looking at a description of the moral crisis and its implication for MacIntyre’s project and multiculturalism. (2.1) The consideration then attends to MacIntyre’s search for the “best moral theory” and to his concept of teleology (2.2) that indicates both universal and particular aspects. This will be followed by the examination of MacIntyre’s core concept of virtue and the idea of practice which is central to this concept (2.3). The last section of this part (2.4) concentrates on the role of the search for the good life and its

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<sup>2</sup> For example see the post scriptum of the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of *After Virtue*, where he spends a chapter defending against charges of relativism (cf. MacIntyre 1995, 362-368) or the analysis of Weber: “MacIntyre möchte sich nicht dem historischen oder theoretischen Relativismus verschreiben, sondern im Gegenteil seine Idee verteidigen, daß die Philosophie, die Welt, die Politik eine neue und starke Konzeption des menschlichen Guten braucht, verbunden mit einem wiedergewonnenen Tugendbegriff. Die Tugenden unterstützen seiner Ansicht nach unsere Verbindung zur Vergangenheit und Zukunft und weisen uns unseren Platz innerhalb der Tradition“ (Weber 2002, 42).

connection to the traditional and historical aspects of MacIntyre's approach in correlation to the narrative condition of the human being. In the following part (3) the implications of the universal and particular aspects of multiculturalism will be drawn together and supplemented by the investigation of two common accusations made towards MacIntyre's approach: the differentiation of good and harmful traditions, and the problem of relativism, (3.1) which purport to have severe influence on the evaluation of the question of multiculturalism. This point will be followed lastly by a discussion of the problem of how MacIntyre is able to choose an Aristotelian ethics without independent rational criteria (3.2). Finally an evaluation and an overview of the question of multiculturalism with the help of MacIntyre's approach will be given.

## **2. The universal and particular implications of MacIntyre's theory**

### 2.1 MacIntyre's history of ethics as a world-historical universalism

The moral crisis of the present day, as already mentioned, is MacIntyre's view of the status of modern moral philosophy: While there was a blooming period of ethics in the ancient world and even the dark ages, an "unremarked"<sup>3</sup> catastrophe led to the impossibility of justifying moral conviction, or the resolution of moral disputes, because moral language (terms like "good" or "moral" or "right") has lost its context and become meaningless.<sup>4</sup> According to MacIntyre, it is in the light of this loss of meaning that nowadays incommensurate moral concepts face each other and this actual moral status is to be understood as "emotivistic": Moral verdicts are only apparent sentences and are used to express feelings or as an attempt to generate a change in others e.g. in their beliefs or behaviour. (cf. MacIntyre 1981, chapter 2, p. 13-26) (MacIntyre is referring to a prevalent pluralism and relativism which have dominated moral debates.) Thus, the determination of moral problems with the help of rational argumentation is no longer possible.

MacIntyre explains the rise of the crisis as follows: previously we find traditional moral theories, which were teleological, particular ethics concerned with virtues and practices, and as such functioning ethical accounts<sup>5</sup> (i.e. the above

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<sup>3</sup> "For the catastrophe will have to have been of such a kind that it was not and has not been [...] recognized as catastrophe. We shall have to look not for a few brief striking events [...], but for a much longer, more complex and less easily identified process [...]" (MacIntyre 1981, 4).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. MacIntyre 1981, chapter 1, 1-5. MacIntyre's explanation of this loss of context will be discussed later.

<sup>5</sup> MacIntyre's notion of a "functional" account of ethics will be explained in the following chapter.

mentioned “blooming period”). But the turning away from virtue-orientated accounts towards universalistic approaches and especially the “failure” of the Enlightenment of formulating a rational founded universal moral principle bear the blame for the moral crisis (cf. MacIntyre 1981, 50-52).

This analysis of the history of the decline of the virtues and the sketch of a relativistic *status quo* in moral debates can be called universal insofar as MacIntyre is describing the history of moral philosophy as a whole and as a continuing process. Here two implications arise for multiculturalism: (i) According to MacIntyre’s prognosis modern multicultural society seems doomed to moral misunderstandings and endless ethical debates as there is no rational way of understanding each other. (ii) There seems to be some hope, nevertheless, as there have been functional ethical theories in the past. MacIntyre’s claim is to “revive”<sup>6</sup> one of these theories, namely: Aristotelian virtue ethics.

## 2.2 The search for the “best moral theory” and the telos-concept

MacIntyre asserts that there can be no perfect theory of ethics (which every rational being necessarily has to consent to) but we can at least try to identify the best theory to emerge so far in the history of this class of theories,<sup>7</sup> (cf. MacIntyre 1995, 359) and therefore we have to strive for this best theory. There are a number of problems with this idea which will be dealt with in a later section of this essay (3.3.). For now it shall be noted that such a search implies that there can be rational agreement on what constitutes the “best theory” and thus there can be rational dispute beforehand. For MacIntyre the best moral theory available is Aristotle’s. His ambition in *After Virtue* is to break off the Aristotelian model from its historical context and recommend it as a rational way of dealing with traditions<sup>8</sup>, because it is the best tradition to be found to date (cf. Reese-Schäfer 1997, 266). MacIntyre discards and alters many aspects of Aristotle’s ethics<sup>9</sup>, e.g. the refusal of Aristotle’s “metaphysical biology” and the total alteration of the

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<sup>6</sup> MacIntyre says explicitly that he wants to: “make a new start to the enquiry in order to put Aristotelianism to the question all over again” (MacIntyre 1981, 112).

<sup>7</sup> MacIntyre brings up this point as a defence against relativism and against the claim that he has to use the very modern principles that he rejects. This aspect will be discussed later in this essay.

<sup>8</sup> This seems contrary to his claim that a philosophical tradition is bound to its context (cf. MacIntyre 1995, 356). MacIntyre himself claims to regard Aristotle as a representative of a long tradition (cf. MacIntyre 1981, 137).

<sup>9</sup> In fact there are different opinions on MacIntyre’s interpretation of Aristotle. Some claim that MacIntyre is “much less Aristotelian than he allows” (cf. Gutting 1999, 99).

concept of practice. However, one of the most important notions that MacIntyre retains is that of teleology.

According to MacIntyre only a teleological account of ethics is reasonable, because he understands ethics as a doctrine of the transition from the current (natural) status of the human being (“man-as-he-happens-to-be” (MacIntyre 1981, 59)) to the status of “man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realised-his-*telos*” (ibid.). With the loss of teleology, all moral prescriptions lose their reference and their meaning (i.e. their intelligibility). MacIntyre claims that this is what happened in the above mentioned crisis: teleology was given up as an ethical concept and MacIntyre blames the Enlightenment.

The *telos*-concept which MacIntyre is trying to recreate, whose necessity to ethics he proclaims, indicates an essentialist notion (at least if it is an Aristotelian teleology, that sets the ends into the being itself), which has as such a universal claim as it is defined by striving for the highest goal/end set down by nature.

The precepts which enjoin the various virtues and prohibit the vices which are their counterparts instruct us how to move from potentiality to act, how to realize our true nature, and to reach our true end. To defy them will be to be frustrated and incomplete, to fail to achieve that good of rational happiness which it is peculiarly ours as a species to pursue. (MacIntyre 1981, 50)

However, in the recreation of the *telos*-concept, MacIntyre connects the *telos* to his practice-concept and claims that it can only be conveyed through social context: If the practices an individual takes part in (and their internal goods) as well as their virtues are not compatible, the choice between competing claims is “individual” (cf. MacIntyre 1981, 188). So there has to be a concept of a superior *telos* that connects or “transcends” the practices and their goods; for MacIntyre this is the good of a whole human life as a unity, and this unity of a whole life is a narrative order. (cf. MacIntyre 1981, 189) Consequently, the *telos* has to constitute the good of a whole human life in order to transcend the limited goods of practices and to order the virtues, which are derived from these goods. (cf. MacIntyre 1981, 188-189). Thus, the *telos* can only be found relative to the goods of the practices the individual takes part in. Here the question arises: Is the *telos* only internal to its context? If such a *telos* is thought as particular/relative (to the individual human being and its social context), then there is no *telos* which is inherent to all human beings. How then can such a *telos* add to the search for a good life?

The concept of a transcending *telos* is clearly somehow universal insofar as the structure of this teleological narrative frame should be the same for every person. However, as the narrative unity of every human life is different and depends on the narrative of its society, the *telos* is relative (to the kind of practices a human takes part in in his life). How then can this *telos* of one good human life as a uni-

ty, which derives from the individual history of a person, connect the practices shared in a community?<sup>10</sup> This is only possible if all individuals in a society take part in the same practices. Even then, the *telos* or *teloi* remain culture-relative.

The full implications for multiculturalism regarding this point are unclear: Following MacIntyre's idea of the *telos* would not different practices from other traditions lead to different *teloi*? As the *telos* is that to which moral rules refer to, in MacIntyre's concept of ethics, there seems to be no way to bring together different moral ideas from different cultures.

### 2.3 MacIntyre's theory of virtue and practice

In his effort to develop a non-metaphysical concept of *telos* and to renew Aristotelian virtue ethics, whilst also accepting the fact that there are different ideas of the virtues, MacIntyre proclaims the possibility of a "unitary core concept" of virtue: "[...] we can discover such a core concept and [...] it turns out to provide the tradition [...] with its conceptual unity" (MacIntyre 1981, 174). Hence, he can not only determine a theory superior to others, he also implies that there is a concept of virtue every virtue theory shares and which applies to virtues as such. MacIntyre puts this core concept, his definition of the virtues, as follows:

A virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and 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. (MacIntyre 1981, 178)

MacIntyre's concept of the virtues strongly depends on the internal goods of the practices, so that the practice itself sets the scale for excellency. But as the practices are relative to the context of society and to their own histories, their particular virtues are as well. Hence, MacIntyre's theory differs from the Aristotelian model insofar as the Aristotelian virtues are the expression of the human *ratio*, thus are anthropological constants and not dependent on culture or history (cf. Weber 2002, 45 and Rapp 1994, 343).

Nevertheless, to MacIntyre's notion of a core concept belongs also the idea of "genuine virtues": Justice, courage and truthfulness are necessary for the reten-

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<sup>10</sup> MacIntyre names in this context the virtue of integrity or constancy, "which cannot be specified at all except with reference to the wholeness of a human life. [...] This notion of singleness of purpose in a whole life can have no application unless that of a whole life does" (MacIntyre 1981, 189). The notion of a single purpose for a whole life is a questionable thesis. E.g. Borchers criticizes that few people regard their life as a unity or as a reasonable, structured whole thing or the development of a plan: many people don't have a scheme of life and many things they do are the product of coincidence (cf. Borchers 2001, 196-199).

tion of every practice. These virtues are necessary, independent of particular rules of the society or personal moral beliefs (cf. MacIntyre 1981, 179). The codes of justice, etc. are however different and relative to particular traditions. MacIntyre gives the following example:

Lutheran pietists brought up their children to believe that one ought to tell the truth to everybody at all times, whatever the circumstances or consequences [...]. Traditional Bantu parents brought up their children not to tell the truth to unknown strangers, since they believed that this could render the family vulnerable to witchcraft. In our culture many of us have been brought up not to tell the truth to elderly great-aunts who invite us to admire their new hats. (MacIntyre 1981, 180)

He wants to show that each of these traditions has its own way of dealing with named virtues, but that these virtues nonetheless play an important role in all of them. This idea of genuine virtues derives from MacIntyre's classification of practices as social relations to others (cf. MacIntyre 1981, 178).<sup>11</sup> The universal part of this is: every practice functions in a similar way, and named virtues are constitutive to practices, insofar they are "those goods in reference to which [...] we define our relationships to those other people with whom we share the kind of purposes and standards which inform practices" (MacIntyre 1981, 178-179). This means that the concept of practices and the constitutive virtues are formally universal: this structure applies to every culture which shares such forms of social activity. It is important to mention that this works only in special forms of society<sup>12</sup>, namely those which appreciate virtues (cf. MacIntyre 1995, 258). What is the particular part about this idea is the way it allows for the different "shaping" of practices in different societies or cultures with different codes of truthfulness, justice and courage as shown in the example above.

What are the implications for multiculturalism to this point? According to MacIntyre there can be several societies or cultures (coexisting) with a functional virtue ethics with different beliefs about justice, truthfulness and so on, but yet the structure of practices and virtues are the same. Could these societies not engage in rational communication about these constitutive virtues or their structure? Or does the adhesion of the virtues and their particular specification to their practices, which are not shared by traditions, avert such an intercultural communication?

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<sup>11</sup> MacIntyre's definition of practice is quite complex: "[It is] any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which 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 1981, 175).

<sup>12</sup> MacIntyre is referring to the ancient polis, the form of which he regards as ideal for a flourishing virtue ethics.

## 2.4 The search for the good life and the aspect of tradition and historicity

As a result of the idea that virtues can only be conveyed through tradition and social context and are intelligible only within these, MacIntyre can be named a particularist, more exactly, a cultural and historical particularist. This results from his definition of virtues as internal goods of practices (cf. MacIntyre 1981, 178), which are enclosed in so called “narrative unities” of the human life. Those unities are important for his notion of the good life (which again he needs for his teleology outlined above): “[T]he good life for man is the life spent in seeking for the good life for man [...]” (MacIntyre 1981, 204).

The question about the good life is the question about the unity of individual life as a narrative unity of incarnated narration (cf. MacIntyre 1981, 204). MacIntyre’s circular definition of the good life as a life of posing systematic questions about what is good for “me” and good for human beings points to his conception of the unity of the moral life (MacIntyre 1981, 203).<sup>13</sup> The last question (what is good for human beings?) is the question about what all answers to the first question (what is good for me?) have in common. (ibid.) According to MacIntyre, it is this search for the definition of the good that enables us to order other goods, enhances our understanding of the purpose and content of the virtues and to comprehend the place of integrity and constancy in our lives (cf. MacIntyre 1981, 204).

As follows from this definition, the internal goods of practices and the good life are substantially identified in the traditions (cf. Weber 2002, 42). To attain the virtue(s) of a practice it is necessary that the individual is embedded in a self-contained life story and a cultural union, and thus he can only recognize himself as an individual in this context (cf. Weber 2002, 42). The concept of the historicity of human life is the necessary replacement for Aristotle’s metaphysical/naturalistic foundation of the essence and *telos* of human life, which MacIntyre rejects. It implies that our action has a genuine historical character for without narrative order human action would only be a dislocated sequence (cf. MacIntyre 1981, 200).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> While the Aristotelian good is developed from a species-specific theory of perfection (and therefore obviously teleological), MacIntyre’s concept of a “good life” refers to the constitution of practices, which also have intrinsic aims: the goods are internal to the action, e.g. the special goods achieved by playing chess (analytical skill, strategic imagination).

<sup>14</sup> “The heart of his elaborate argument is the claim that there is no way of understanding an action apart from locating it in a causal and temporal sequence of actions” (Gutting 1999, 96).

[...] action itself has a basically historical character. It is because we all live out narratives in our lives and because we understand our own lives in terms of narratives that we live out that the form of narrative is appropriate for understanding the action of others. Stories are lived before they are told – except in the case of fiction. (MacIntyre 1981, 197)

An individual's own history in turn is embedded in the history of the community, which again extends to the past and to tradition. Therefore the virtues have to preserve the traditions, because they provide the historical context necessary for the life and praxis of the individual. This means that MacIntyre enhances the Aristotelian thought of the locally bound and at the same time universal good insofar as the good can only be found in the context of tradition and society, but never in the individual alone, since the identity of an individual originates from the roles one has in society (in contrary to Aristotle's universal nature of the human being) (cf. Rapp 1994, 338). The individual circumstances are the bearer of a special social identity and as such an accumulation of roles. Thus, in the works of MacIntyre the good for the individual derives from tradition and the roles one occupies within the tradition, e.g. a fifth-century Athenian general or being member of this or that guild or profession (cf. MacIntyre 1981, 204). "Hence what is good for me has to be the good for one who inhabits these roles" (MacIntyre 1981, 205). (This implies that historical, social and moral identities coincide.) The outcome of this is the impossibility of an impartial standpoint, because the individual is bound to a particular social net, from which it cannot break loose (cf. Weber 2002, 43).

To connect the notion of the search for the good and the social embeddedness of the individual, MacIntyre argues that we need a starting point (i.e. any notion of the good), which derives from the social context and its tradition one is born to and is as such particular (MacIntyre 1981, 203). It is the starting point such that: "moving forward from such particularity that the search for the good, for the universal, consists" (MacIntyre 1981, 205). "But, given MacIntyre's starting point in specific practices, it is impossible for him to achieve such universalism [comparable to that which Aristotle achieves with his conception of a general human good]" (Gutting 1999, 98). MacIntyre accepts that "[...] particularity can never be simply left behind or obliterated. The notion of escaping from it into a realm of entirely universal maxims which belong to man as such [...] is an illusion" (MacIntyre 1981, 205-206). As a result it is not entirely clear what MacIntyre has to say regarding individuals that belong to more than one tradition, as is very common in our globalised world (cf. Gutting 1999, 98). "MacIntyre claims that an individual life is typically embedded in more than one tradition [...]" (cf. MacIntyre 1981, 222). So we do not typically find ourselves limited by the specificity of a single tradition" (Gutting 1999, 96). Further, individuals do not need to

accept the moral limitations of their tradition (MacIntyre 1981, 221), yet there is no escaping entirely from the tradition in which we are born. Imagine a child with parents from different cultural backgrounds, raised in one or more countries, exposed to further different cultures as the parents move around. According to MacIntyre there is “no way to unify their [the traditions] incommensurable goods and virtues” (ibid.), which makes it impossible for the individual to derive a conception of his “life as a whole”. Would the child have to choose one of the traditions, to get the necessary starting point for moral reflection (and how could he do so)?<sup>15</sup>

Leaving the claim about particularity aside, the quest for the good life is, according to MacIntyre, something that human beings seem to have in common. This shared quest is not the only general description of the human being that is found in *After Virtue*. His major definition of human beings is that the human is a “story-telling animal” (MacIntyre 1981, 201). As we have already looked at some of the implications of this definition, it will suffice here to notice that in holding this view MacIntyre has a general (universal) idea of the *conditio humana*.

Also connected to this is MacIntyre’s account of the self as a “narrative unity”, as an “unacknowledged presence” (MacIntyre 1981, 191) and the naturalness of thinking about the self in a narrative form, for the human being (cf. MacIntyre 1981, 192). Regarding these descriptions at least it seems that MacIntyre is trying (like Aristotle does with his naturalistic definition of the human as a *rational animal*) to derive his concept of a historically based morality from a common definition of human beings and a universal human way of thinking and acting.

Can this narrative nature and striving for the good life, that all human beings seem to share, be an aspect of how different cultures can communicate about the good? But as the good can only derive from the good(s) of particular individuals sharing particular practices in a particular tradition, that someone outside these practices can’t understand<sup>16</sup>, there seems to be no way for an intercultural communication about the good, even if all human beings share the same structure of thinking. In locating the narrative order of action into the particular practices MacIntyre bars this possibility.

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<sup>15</sup> Gutting looks into the subject of conflicting traditions, drawing on MacIntyre’s explanations of an individual accepting a tradition in *Whose justice- Which rationality?*, with the conclusion that they require “that individuals exist as rational inquirers without a full commitment to any tradition” (Gutting, 1999, 104) what “sits ill” with his notion that rational inquiry is impossible outside some specific tradition (cf. ibid., 105).

<sup>16</sup> “For MacIntyre, tradition is precisely the locus of rational thought” (Gutting 1999, 97).

### 3. The usefulness of MacIntyre's theory regarding multiculturalism

As can be seen from the course of the essay hitherto, the debate in question covers both universal and particular aspects of moral theory (that cannot always be distinguished clearly). So far, on the one hand, the analysis of the history of ethics and the *telos*-concept "as it sets the standard of highest end for which we strive" have been proven universal, as well as the implicit possibility of rational agreement on the "best moral theory" and the explicit search for a "unitary core concept" of virtues. Also of formal universality is MacIntyre's concept of practices and along with it the "genuine virtues" (the virtues constitutive to practices). Likewise the search for the good life that is inherent to all human beings and the narrative mode of thought and action are notions of universal scope.

On the other hand, the *telos*-concept is particular insofar it has to remain culture-relative, because it only transcends the particular goods of one own culture's practices. Also particular is the shaping of practices and therefore the manifestations of the virtues in different traditions or cultures. The dependency of the virtues on tradition and social context, the embeddedness of the individual in his specific context, and the dependence of the search for the good for the individual on the society he lives in, where he fulfils his roles, as well as his particular "starting point" also imply particularity.

The implications for multiculturalism and its question of conflicting moral beliefs or systems on this point are the following: The world-historical universalism is descriptive and cannot show how or if there's a possibility of solving this problem, on the contrary, MacIntyre's description of the decline of the virtues is a pessimistic response to this challenge. The superior *telos* cannot transcend the practices of different cultures, but just the one it is derived from, so there cannot be the one *telos* that connects them all. Even if there can be cultures with analogous structures of practices and virtues, there still would be a difference regarding the practices and virtues themselves, insofar as which practices are shared and how their particular virtues are shaped. If the practices of the different cultures have no interference points, there is no means of approach for communication about the virtues. Though all human beings share a narrative condition, different cultures can't communicate about the good, if they have no common practices.

Though the evaluation of MacIntyre's approach regarding multicultural problems is rather pessimistic at this point, there are two aspects which still deserve closer study in order to evaluate further the implications for multiculturalism.

### 3.1 Differentiation of good and harmful traditions and the accusation of relativism

One of these aspects is the question of differentiation of good and harmful traditions, which ensues from MacIntyre's notion of tradition as the source of the good life: If the traditions determine what a good life is, which scale do we use to judge these traditions themselves? (cf. O'Neill 1996, 36, 37). According to this objection particularistic notions like this run the risk of approving harmful traditions.

A potential counterargument for the cultural particularist would be to claim that it is possible to offer situative or internal criticism within the tradition/culture (cf. O'Neill 1996, 37). Thus, local stories, which represent everyday practices, would be sufficiently reflexive and self-critical to judge themselves. MacIntyre formulates the possibility of internal criticism in his idea of a "living tradition" (MacIntyre 1995, 296-297), which he defines as "a historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constituted that tradition" (MacIntyre 1981, 207).

This idea implies that every critique and invention (and also every moral progress?) takes place in the context of the previous tradition. The definition of tradition as a kind of continuing argument neglects the fact that surely not all traditions are self-reflective in the sense of engaging in dispute about its own goods, and the fact that traditions change doesn't imply this offhandedly. Seyla Benhabib makes this criticism, as I will elaborate:

First, cultures and traditions are not distinct and homogenous semantic fields "as would be necessary for this kind of internal criticism", but in their particular definition (e.g. "the western culture", "the Anglo-American liberal thinking tradition") they are "ideal types" (in Max Weber's terms) (cf. Benhabib 1993, 22). They are formed from the "rug of meaning and interpretation" within the horizon of the social world. (cf. *ibid.*) Thus, within a culture there are no predefined criteria of legitimation and self-critique, but the norms, principles and values are continuously interpreted, adopted, reconstructed, reformed etc. As has been shown previously, MacIntyre does define tradition as an "argument" and "living tradition", but there is never a sole complex of constitutive criteria to characterize complex social practices, about which a universal consensus rules in the culture and which allows an immanent critique. Such critique would require that the meaning of the culture's tales be unambiguous, which as such, is not the case. On the contrary, cultural narrations are conflict-laden and often irreconcilable (cf. Benhabib 1993, 22-23). Thus the argument of internal criticism is useless for distinguishing good and harmful traditions, because the internal scale of tradition and self-criticism itself varies and can't solve problems which regard borders and categories (cf. O'Neill 1996, 37-38).

Second, to hold the claim of situative critique it is necessary that the constitutive norms of a culture hold sufficient criteria of rationality in order to criticize itself. However, within a culture or society, there can be times in which discussion and critique is improbable or “exiled”. This means that critique requires a necessary distance from an individual’s everyday-certainties – “a room outside” becomes necessary, so to speak (and in case of the exile another social room) (cf. Benhabib 1993, 23). This can also be made clear with the example of discrimination, which isn’t necessarily obvious, but can be deep-rooted in the methods of interpretation and judgment itself and limit the critical potential internal to tradition (cf. O’Neill 1996, 37-38).

Another possible answer to the objection of “harmful traditions” is a kind of external criticism that MacIntyre describes: When two rival, incompatible traditions meet in a historical situation it is sometimes possible that such traditions rely on considerations which are effective in both of them (cf. MacIntyre 1995, 366). That is to say that they necessarily share some common attributes and thereby sometimes it will be possible to evaluate the positions of their rivals with their own scales “which derive from their own practices” (cf. *ibid.*). Accordingly, the only possibility for a rational solution is the chance of shared criteria of morality. With this, however, arises the question of how we find such commonalities?

Thus, for a society consisting of plural cultures the strategy of external criticism seems applicable only if there are already common grounds. For MacIntyre’s theory that is to say that they share practices from which grasp of internal goods common moral criteria can be derived. If a tradition or society is already too “corrupted” to offer possibilities of confrontation and communication, there is no possibility of internal or external criticism and therefore no way of distinguishing good from harmful traditions.

The problem of differentiation leads finally to the accusation of relativism. An ethical approach of this kind struggles to escape the criticism of being relativistic and with it arbitrary, as it can give no justification for the acknowledgement of a tradition in contrary to another as ethically relevant (cf. O’Neill 1996, 36), because moral judgements can only be rendered intelligible from within a tradition and relative to its practices: The *telos* of a human life is relative to the internal goods of the practices it is connected to, and is thus relative to its culture; the virtues are relative to their practices (except the “genuine” ones, as mentioned above); and the practices in turn are relative to their culture or tradition, which is again relative to its history. It follows that, moral judgements about the virtues of practices are culture- and history-relative. Even MacIntyre’s argument of possible common practices, as mentioned above, doesn’t help to escape the claim that those judgements are still relative to the tradition(s). In addition, it is still arbitrary if there are commonalities of those traditions “even if those traditions

derive from a shared history”. Consequentially there are no superordinate criteria to judge the practices, traditions or moral beliefs derived from them.

### 3.2 The retorsion: Which criterion determines the “best moral theory”?

Likewise the absence of an absolute criterion to judge moral philosophy (cf. MacIntyre 1995, 357) is a problem for MacIntyre’s claim that Aristotelian moral philosophy is superior to other theories, because for this judgement he needs a criterion on a higher level, in order to come to this conclusion.

Against the charge of needing non-historical standards himself to judge several moral systems with a pragmatic argument (cf. Illies 2003, 169), he makes his claim about “the best theory so far”, mentioned in (2.2), which can be replaced by or rather changed into a better theory (his concept of “living tradition”), which implies a never-ending writing of philosophical history and excludes any claim to absolute knowledge (cf. MacIntyre 1995, 359). A moral philosophy which is better than another means it has rational superiority over its rival theory, and it demonstrates the ability to identify and transcend the limitations of its rival, which again have been identified by the rational standards of the rival theory itself (cf. MacIntyre 1995, 357).

This counter-argument is problematic, insofar as the rational superiority of a theory over another implies that the “better theory” understands the rational standards of its rival, thus, either there are rational standards which apply to both theories, independently of their traditional and historical position, or there is a way to understand particular rational standards from outside of the theory that they belong to – MacIntyre denies both possibilities. He proclaims (by contrast to his search for “the best moral theory”) that moral philosophy is the explicit articulation of a particular social and cultural position (cf. MacIntyre 1995, 356) and a tradition of thinking can’t be replaced totally, as the present is only a comment on the past, and can correct and transcend the past, but never totally get rid of it (cf. MacIntyre 1981, 137-138). So, on the one hand, MacIntyre has a notion of moral progress in history, which stands diagonally to his history of decay of moral philosophy. On the other hand, moral philosophies are bound to their cultural context and can never totally be replaced.

Regarding MacIntyre’s historicistic view of moral theories, the question remains how MacIntyre is able to pick out Aristotle’s ethics as the best theory so far and especially out of which tradition of moral theories? How MacIntyre himself can even understand Aristotle as the connection of the tradition of the ancient polis to a Scottish Catholic society cannot clearly be followed. He can’t escape the accusation that he selects from the past from his own criteria and therefore uses

modern principles (cf. Reese-Schäfer 1997, 267). To be able to judge which the best theory is he still needs timeless standards in order to assess which theory is the best one. According to Illies (2003):

If the standards for a “better” theory is that it replaces prior theories (as he suggests on p. 270), then Nietzsche’s theory (...) must be regarded as much better than Aristotle’s or MacIntyre’s own – after all, there are many more philosophers following Nietzsche’s rejection of truth in moral matters than philosophers who look to the Aristotelian tradition for the *telos* of man. (Illies 2003, 169)

In summary MacIntyre lacks a scale for judging tradition and so does internal criticism; he therefore cannot escape arbitrariness and can give no reasonable criterion for why he chooses an Aristotelian virtue ethics instead of another.

#### **4. Ethical question in a globalised society**

The evaluation of the universal and particular aspects of MacIntyre’s approach, on the one hand points to an universal understanding of the history of ethics and the possibility of finding a moral theory superior to all others, more precisely a core conception of virtue ethics with a formally universal structure of a *telos* and practices, which are based on the narrative condition of thinking and acting common to all human beings. On the other hand it shows us that though those structures can be equal, these concepts of narrative imply a strong dependency of moral theories and beliefs on tradition and history, because they are construed from the practices relative to those. The strong social and historical embeddedness of the individual and the intelligibility of morality don’t allow a search for the good independently of society and thus no impartial standpoint and no intercultural reasoning about the good, as without shared practices there can be no common standing ground for understanding each other.

Out of this evaluation arises the question of whether it is really true that traditions don’t share practices or have a common narrative frame? As MacIntyre regards world history as a whole, it can be argued that at least many traditions must be connected in a narrative way. If nothing else, MacIntyre regards himself in the same tradition as Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas. It could be argued that we just have to go back in history far enough to find practices that our current different traditions once shared, and then to develop a comprehension of the practices of other traditions from there. This would mean that the commonalities would not be arbitrary any more (as criticised in 3.1) but originate from a common narration and would be inherent to both traditions. According to what MacIntyre does himself in going back to Aristotle and redeveloping his ethics this should be

possible. Using this means one could knot a world-historical narration for all existing traditions, and search for the practices common to all of them (see Martha Nussbaum's empirical search for the fundamental elements of live for all human beings). If this can be defended, the constraint of traditions as closed narrative frame would cease to apply (as per the criticism in 3.1) - and the relativism with it. The thought can't be excluded that from a shared practice emerge different "branches" and these can be traced back to a common history and thus be intelligible from the context of the respectively new practices. If the apprehension of a practice through its predecessor isn't possible, MacIntyre's approach of historical intelligibility will have to be dumped, because intelligibility herein derives from narration. For multiculturalism this approach would mean that different nations and cultures have to become aware of their common roots (if those exist) and develop a history of common practices to comprehend their particular grasps of morality. The question remains: can this lead to a common standing ground from which evaluation of different moral systems are possible?

It follows that MacIntyre has not fully resolved the question of how the constraint to a tradition- and local-bound moral system at least in respect of practice is adequate for modern society. For example his theory has difficulties providing a satisfying explanation of justice. Orientation of modern political and economical systems cannot take place on the basis of local and traditional situatedness, but inevitably demands a standard, which is universally or interculturably applicable (cf. O'Neill 1996, 35). As we have seen, MacIntyre would consent to the problem of practical difficulties of comprehension, which emerges in ethical dialogues with individuals between different traditions, because these are exactly the symptoms he describes regarding his thesis about the modern moral debate. However, his particularistic view of ethics offers no answer to the ethical questions which arise when different traditions have to deal with each other. A cultural particularistic account of ethics, which proclaims every understanding between different cultures is impossible, seems to be entirely misplaced in a modern world of multicultural societies.

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