

What's wrong with 'communitarianism' ?

A liberal appraisal of Alasdair MacIntyre's *Ethics of Virtue*

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Counting as "one of the best-selling books of academic philosophy in the last half century,"¹ *After Virtue* (1981) has imposed Alasdair MacIntyre as a leading figure on the scene of contemporary ethics. As David Solomon has observed, it seems "difficult to name an Anglophone moral philosopher writing in the second half of the twentieth century, other than John Rawls, whose influence on the broader culture has been as great as that of MacIntyre."² Though he has later extended—and to some measure corrected or softened—the views he brought forward in the early 1980s, *After Virtue* remains MacIntyre's most comprehensive attempt to promote an Aristotelian ethics of the virtues as the best available remedy to what he calls the moral confusion of our times. In that respect, it has been appropriately described as "the Urtext for MacIntyre's later work."³

The moral philosophy articulated in *After Virtue* is time and again evaluated with respect to its political implications. While some apologists of liberal democracy discard its plea for a renewed Aristotelianism as being not even worthy of a critical discussion,⁴ some "neo-

traditionalist" theologians⁵ claim the book to be a major source of inspiration for their own theological dismissal of what they denounce as the moral shortcomings of liberal democracy.⁶ Both sorts of appraisals interpret the political intentions of the book in communitarian terms, insisting on those passages in which MacIntyre seems to drift in the direction of some drastic withdrawal from the "modern political order" and calls for a thorough distrust toward "modern politics" and its "institutional forms," which he

Qu'est-ce qu'un peuple libre? (Paris: Grasset, 2005), p. 208. These authors may not intend to dismiss MacIntyre's proposal as intrinsically worthless, but they explicitly discard it as thoroughly incompatible with the most basic principles of liberal democracy.

⁵ In *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), Jeffrey Stout coined the expression "new traditionalism" to qualify John Milbank's and Stanley Hauerwas's religiously and politically anti-liberal "claim that democracy undermines itself by destroying the traditional vehicles needed for transmitting the virtues from one generation to another" (p. 12).

⁶ See for instance Stanley Hauerwas, *A Better Hope: Resources for a Church Confronting Capitalism, Democracy, and Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2000). In this essay, as in countless others, Hauerwas invokes MacIntyre's authority to sustain his own claim "that if the gospel is true, the politics of liberalism must be false" (ibid., p. 124). As Stout rightly argues, "Hauerwas not only pronounces MacIntyre correct; he ups the ante, outbidding MacIntyre in a rhetoric of excess" (*Democracy and Tradition*, p. 118).

¹ David Solomon, "MacIntyre and Contemporary Moral Philosophy", in Mark C. Murphy (ed.), *Alasdair MacIntyre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 141.

² Ibid., p. 142.

³ Ibid., p. 130.

⁴ See for instance Sylvie Mesure & Alain Renaut, *Alter Ego. Les paradoxes de l'identité démocratique* (Paris: Aubier, 1999), p. 162; see also Alain Renaut,

severely portrays as “totally unfitted to act as moral educator of any community.”⁷

Are we to take such outspoken records of anti-modern and anti-liberal rhetoric as MacIntyre's final verdict on the politics and institutions of liberal democracy? The present essay, whose central purpose is to answer this question, divides into two main parts. Part one is meant to provide a descriptive account of how *After Virtue* reconstructs Aristotle's ethics of the virtues. Part two endeavors to reappraise this reconstruction in the light of the critical discussions it has generated and in consideration of later developments in MacIntyre's thought; it argues that MacIntyre's allegedly “communitarian” philosophy is best understood—if the label is to be of any use at all—as a moral-political doctrine that is hardly concerned with the legal-political issues at stake in the contemporary discussions of communitarian politics, whether conceived in multicultural or in civic republican terms.

1. MacIntyre's reconstruction of Aristotle's virtue ethics

In order to recover the lost rationality of public moral debate, *After Virtue* pleads for a renewed allegiance to the Aristotelian tradition of the virtues. This tradition, in which MacIntyre seeks the remedy to our moral confusion, carries a teleological conception of the virtues drawn from Aristotelian insights into the means and goods internal to practices. The provenance of this conception, its ethical content and its political implications shall here be specified.

1.1. Whose tradition? Which Aristotle?

In reviewing *After Virtue*, Peter Sedgwick has described the book as signing a radical turn in MacIntyre's assessment of Aristotle's moral philosophy. The high esteem in which *After Virtue* holds Aristotelian ethics seems indeed to be at

odds with MacIntyre's earlier statements about it, most notably those uttered in *A Short History of Ethics* (1967): “The devotees of *A Short History of Ethics* will recall the devastating put-down of Aristotle contained in that work: the *Nicomachean Ethics* is a priggish, parochial, complacent book, and its author a class-bound conservative.”⁸ As Sedgwick rightly argues, a fairly different picture is offered in *After Virtue*, where “the same book and the same author are dealt with” as the “source of the major integrative concepts that will restore moral reasoning to its proper coherence and stature.”⁹

What Sedgwick overlooks, however, is that *After Virtue* reads the *Nicomachean Ethics* through the lenses of its reception in medieval aristotelianism. The main sources of this interpretative tradition are to be found in the works of Aristotle's Jewish, Islamic, and Christian commentators. MacIntyre is clearly aware that some of the most basic features of his own ethics of the virtues are mediated through this selective and refashioning construal of Aristotle's moral philosophy: this tradition, so he argues, “sets itself in a relation of dialogue with Aristotle, rather than in any relationship of simple assent” (AV, 165)

This means that the same adjective—Aristotelian—qualifies two quite different doctrines in the two books contrasted by Sedgwick. MacIntyre has in fact never repudiated his early criticism of Aristotle's ethics. In his preface to the second edition of *A Short History of Ethics* (1998), he still endorses the verdict he had enunciated some thirty years earlier: “I had been justifiably anxious in my discussion of Aristotle to criticize that which had tied his ethics too closely to the structures of the fourth-century Greek polis and more especially to reject his ill-founded exclusion of women, slaves, and ordinary productive working people from the possibility of the virtues of rule and self-rule and of

⁷ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1981; Second corrected edition with Postscript, 1985), p. 255. The abbreviation AV refers to the second edition.

⁸ Peter Sedgwick, “The Ethical Dance. A Review of Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*,” in *Socialist Register* (1982), reproduced in *Marxists' Internet Archive*, www.marxists.org/archive/sedgwick/1982/xx/macintyre.htm, last updated on 28 nov. 2004.

⁹ *Ibid.*

the achievement of the human good.”¹⁰ What MacIntyre had not “at that time recognized,” so he concedes, “was how much had already been achieved within later Aristotelian tradition by way of purging Aristotle’s ethics of these inessential and objectionable elements and how Aristotle’s central theses and arguments are in no way harmed by their complete excision.”¹¹

After Virtue can be read as a major step in the process of this recognition. As the book examines, for example, the relation between Aristotle and his thirteenth-century Christian interpreters, it concludes that some substantial differences in their catalogues of virtues (AV, 182) and in their conceptions of history (AV, 147) explain why questions essential to the medieval tradition of virtues could not find any response in Aristotle’s own work. As MacIntyre readily admits, “Aristotle would certainly not have admired Jesus Christ and he would have been horrified by St Paul” (AV, 184).

Of course, it might seem odd to consider that Aristotle’s significance has to be acknowledged in the terms of a “tradition whose existence he himself did not and could not have acknowledged” (AV, 147). Yet we have to notice that MacIntyre does not conceive traditions as immutable sets of beliefs and practices (AV, 222). The changes and adjustments of the medieval tradition of virtues appears in this outlook as a simple illustration of what MacIntyre says about traditions in general: they are bound to transform themselves in a process of critical reinterpretation and their contacts with rival traditions play, in some circumstances, a crucial role in such transformations.¹²

¹⁰ Alasdair MacIntyre, “Preface”, in *A Short History of Ethics. A History of Moral Philosophy from the Homeric Age to the twentieth Century* (New York: MacMillan, 1966; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967; second edition, Routledge, 1998), p. xvii. The abbreviated title *Short History* refers to the second edition.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² See Marc Boss, “On the Very Ideas of Commensurability and Translation. Alasdair MacIntyre contra Donald Davidson,” in Patrik Fridlund, Lucie Kaennel and Catharina Stenqvist (eds.), *Plural Voices. Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Interreligious Issues* (Leuven: Peeters Publishers), 2009.

In the case we are concerned with, this process is facilitated by a “logical and conceptual” parallelism between the moral discourse of the New Testament as read by Aquinas and Aristotle’s ethics of virtues (AV, 184). Both are teleologically oriented toward the human good and both insist that the relationship between the good life—as the end we pursue—and the virtues—as means to this end—is to be considered as “internal and not external” (AV, 184), i.e., that “[t]he exercise of the virtues is itself a crucial component of the good life” (AV, 184).

This interpretation of Aristotle’s moral philosophy, which appraises its teleological structure in the light of the “internal” relation it establishes between the virtues and the good life, compels MacIntyre to give a central significance to those passages of the *Nicomachean Ethics* which associate virtue with the kind of excellence required in arts and sciences, or in other particular human practices (AV, 187). “Aristotle”, he says, “takes it as a starting-point for ethical enquiry that the relationship of ‘man’ to ‘living well’ is analogous to that of ‘harpist’ to ‘playing the harp well’ (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1095a 16)” (AV, 58). It is in such well-defined types of practices that MacIntyre finds the basic meaning of Aristotle’s major ethical concepts. A retrieval of these concepts implies therefore a recovering of their vital relation to the practices out of which they have grown. As MacIntyre puts it in the preface to the second edition of his *Short History of Ethics*, “Aristotelian conceptions of goods, virtues, and rules are regenerated” whenever they are understood from within the context of such practices.¹³ This is what *After Virtue* endeavours to do.

1.2. Practice as a key concept: a moral statement

In *After Virtue* practices are described as “coherent and complex” forms of human activity that are both “socially established” and “cooperative” (AV, 187). As contemporary examples, MacIntyre mentions games such as baseball or chess, scientific investigations as those of physics or

¹³ Preface, in *Short History*, p. xvii.

medicine, artistic activities such as music or painting, or “productive activities” such as farming and fishing. Insofar as all such practices involve “standards of excellence” and require “obedience to rule” (AV, 190), they provide a pattern of authority in reference to which MacIntyre endeavours to understand how authority works in moral traditions. To enter into a practice, he says, is to acknowledge the authority of “those who have preceded us in the practice, particularly those whose achievements extended the reach of the practice to its present point” (AV, 194). In other words, the kind of authority we confront in a practice is always the achievement of a tradition whose norms obey the logic of a learning process that tends to “rule out all subjectivist and emotivist analyses of judgment” (AV, 190). From the standpoint of practices, taste is a matter of dispute: “De gustibus *est* disputandum” (AV, 190). This does not mean, on MacIntyre’s view, that the norms originating in a practice can claim some kind of infallible authority. Practices undergo historical developments produced by internal critique. Their norms may change as a consequence of such developments (AV, 193-194). Yet I cannot enter into a practice without accepting the authority of its current standards of excellence and without acknowledging the “inadequacy of my own performance as judged by them” (AV, 190). MacIntyre illustrates this point with the following examples:

If, on starting to listen to music, I do not accept my own incapacity to judge correctly, I will never learn to hear, let alone to appreciate, Bartok’s last quartets. If, on starting to play baseball, I do not accept that others know better than I when to throw a fast ball and when not, I will never learn to appreciate good pitching let alone to pitch (AV, 190).

These examples suggest that the norms and rules of practices are mainly concerned with excellence understood in terms of technical skill or proficiency, and thus that the concept of practice is merely meant to provide a nonmoral pattern for moral authority. Yet the concept of practice is also essential, on MacIntyre’s view, “to the whole enterprise of identifying a core concept of the virtues” (AV, 187). Practices play indeed a

decisive role on the first of the three stages he distinguishes in this enterprise—the second and third stages corresponding to the further tasks of defining virtue in respect to “the narrative order of a single human life” and in consideration of “what constitutes a moral tradition” (AV, 187). MacIntyre ascribes moral significance and value to practices insofar as they form an “essential constituent” of this threefold account of the virtues. Yet he insists that practices cannot be described as being intrinsically moral. The qualities they require remain morally ambivalent as long as they do not satisfy the demands specified on the two further stages. They are so to say necessary—though not sufficient—conditions for a fully developed ethics of the virtues (AV, 187).

MacIntyre associates the moral ambivalence of practices with a twofold characteristic of theirs: firstly, they provide internal as well as external goods; secondly, they cannot last without institutional support.

Practices can hardly claim any moral significance if they are merely oriented toward “external goods,” but they do have moral import if their “internal goods” are pursued with “internal means.” As examples of external goods, MacIntyre mentions social advantages such as “fame, prestige, and money.”¹⁴ These external goods are related to practices “by the accidents of social circumstance” (AV, 188). Therefore they can always be obtained through other means. “Internal goods,” in contrast, can only be obtained through “internal means.” To pursue the goods internal to a given practice one has to participate in the practice itself and to strive for excellence in terms fixed by its own standards. Goods internal to the practice of chess, for instance, are goods that can be obtained only by playing chess. They can only be described in terms of chess and “they can only be identified and recognized by the experience of participating in the practice in question” (AV, 188-189). They provide reasons “not just for winning on a particular occasion, but for trying to excel whatever way the game of chess demands” (AV, 188).

The distinction drawn between internal and external goods underpins the distinction MacIn-

¹⁴ Postscript, in AV, p. 274; see also AV, p. 188.

tyre establishes between practices and institutions: “Chess, physics and medicine are practices; chess clubs, laboratories, universities and hospitals are institutions” (AV, 194). Such institutions are “characteristically and necessarily” dealing with goods external to the practices that they are meant to support; their main purpose is to acquire external goods such as money, power, and status, and to distribute them as rewards (AV, 194). MacIntyre is not suggesting that practices should protect their moral integrity by simply pursuing their internal goods without seeking for institutional support. He not only claims that practices, if they are to survive “for any length of time,” need to be sustained by institutions. He also contends that institutions, if they are to be of any help for “the practices of which they are the bearers,” must be concerned with goods external to those practices (AV, 194).

Indeed so intimate is the relationship of practices to institutions—and consequently of the goods external to the goods internal to the practices in question—that institutions and practices characteristically form a single causal order in which the ideals and the creativity of the practice are always vulnerable to the acquisitiveness of the institutions, in which the cooperative care for common goods of the practice is always vulnerable to the competitiveness of the institution (AV, 194).

It is precisely because practices and institutions form such a “single causal order” that MacIntyre prizes the virtues involved in the pursuit of internal goods: “Without them,” he says, “practices could not resist the corrupting power of institutions” (AV, 194). The three main virtues he identifies in this context are justice (as “fairness in judging oneself and others”), truthfulness (as the sort of honesty “without which fairness cannot find application”) and courage (as the capacity to take, on some occasions, “self-endangering and even achievement-endangering risks”) (AV, 193). Such virtues are required, so MacIntyre argues, for “the kind of cooperation, the kind of recognition of authority and of achievement, the kind of respect for standards and the kind of risk-taking which are characteristically involved in practices” (AV, 193). These virtues are to such a point indispensable to achieve the standards of excellence or the goods internal to a

practice that their absence would render “the practice pointless except as a device for achieving external goods” (AV, 191)

1.3. Justice as a virtue: a political statement

The intimate relationship that MacIntyre establishes between virtues and internal goods carries both moral and political consequences. If any genuine pursuit of the goods internal to a practice requires the acquisition of virtues like justice, truthfulness, and courage, the exercise of such virtues requires in turn “a highly determinate attitude to social and political issues” (AV, 194). On MacIntyre’s view, the “making and sustaining” of human communities and of their political institutions has “all the characteristics of a practice” in which these virtues are cultivated (AV, 194). He claims indeed that it is only “within some particular community with its own specific institutional forms that we learn or fail to learn to exercise the virtues” (AV, 194-195). This claim is what opposes the tradition of virtues to modern conceptions of the political community. In contrast to those apologists of “liberal individualist modernity” who consider the political community as “an arena in which individuals each pursue their own self-chosen conception of the good life,” MacIntyre sees the political community as a practice requiring “the exercise of the virtues for its own sustenance” (AV, 195).

MacIntyre’s conception of political communities as social practices in which virtues are learned and exercised involves a rejection of the liberal idea that such communities could be founded on a mere procedural conception of justice. According to MacIntyre, justice itself must be conceived as a virtue. This means that its exercise presupposes a shared understanding, within the political community, of what the good life is and of what conception of justice it implies. “When Aristotle praised justice as the first virtue of political life, he did so in such a way as to suggest that a community which lacks practical agreement on a conception of justice must also lack the necessary basis for political community” (AV, 244). This lack of practical consensus appears to MacIntyre as a weakness characteristic of liberal societies. Karl Marx, he says,

was right on this point. Liberal societies produce so many “rival and disparate concepts” of justice that they are unable to form consistent political communities (AV, 252):

For quite non-Marxist reasons Marx was in the right when he argued against the English trade unionists of the 1860s that appeals to justice were pointless, since there are rival conceptions of justice formed by and informing the life of rival groups.... [C]onflict and not consensus [are] at the heart of modern social structure.... What this brings out is that modern politics cannot be a matter of genuine moral consensus. And it is not. Modern politics is civil war carried on by other means (AV, 253-253).

According to MacIntyre, this conflict between rival conceptions of justice undermines the very foundations of “both morality and civility” (AV, 263). Given the lack of any moral consensus about the content of virtues in general and of the virtue of justice in particular, the kind of political obligation that was traditionally expressed through the notion of patriotism seems to have no consistency left. Because it is “founded on attachment primarily to a political and moral community and only secondarily to the government of that community,” patriotism is a political virtue hardly exercisable in liberal societies (AV, 254):

In any society where government does not express or represent the moral community of the citizens, but is instead a set of institutional arrangements for imposing a bureaucratized unity on a society which lacks genuine moral consensus, the nature of political obligation becomes systematically unclear (AV, 254).

Where then shall we find the sort of political community MacIntyre seems to be longing for? Insofar as liberal democracies are practically incapable—and theoretically unwilling—to provide a frame for “genuine moral consensus,” the societies they form and regulate can hardly satisfy the requirements of a “moral community of the citizens.” Such societies conceive the relations among citizens in terms of right or utility, not of virtue.

The possibility remains, however, that some of the smaller communities living within the po-

litical frame of liberal democratic societies will uphold various forms of small-scale allegiance to the tradition of the virtues (AV, 252). MacIntyre compares the function that is to be ascribed to such communities in liberal societies to the function Benedictine communities used to have in the late Roman Empire:

A crucial turning point in that earlier history occurred when men and women of good will turned aside from the task of shoring up the Roman *imperium* and ceased to identify the continuation of civility and moral community with the maintenance of that *imperium*. What they set themselves to achieve instead—often not recognizing fully what they were doing—was the construction of new forms of community within which the moral life could be sustained so that both morality and civility might survive the coming ages of barbarism and darkness (AV, 263).

While admitting that it is always somewhat hazardous “to draw too precise parallels between ... our own age in Europe and North America and the epoch in which the Roman empire declined into the Dark Ages” (AV, 263), MacIntyre still praises the way Benedictine communities successfully maintained the tradition of the virtues in the margins of a hostile political order as an inspiring model for our own situation:

What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us. And if the tradition of virtues was able to survive the horrors of the last dark ages, we are not entirely without grounds for hope.... We are waiting not for a Godot, but for another—doubtless very different—St. Benedict (AV, 263).

These words, which form the conclusion of *After Virtue*, have perplexed more than one commentator. While MacIntyre’s emphatic reference to the “new dark ages” seems to entail a considerable distrust toward the modern social order and its governmental institutions, his final expectations about the advent of a new St. Benedict provide a rather cloudy picture of what an alternative order could possibly be.

2. A communitarian critique of liberal democracy?

How are we to explain the political irresoluteness that MacIntyre's critics rightly discern in the concluding words of *After Virtue*? Is it to be described as a mere consequence of his allegedly "communitarian" distrust on liberal democracy? As we shall argue, the rather hazy label of "communitarianism" needs itself to be further qualified—as a sociological or political doctrine and, in the latter case, as a moral-political or a legal-political doctrine—if we want it to provide an earnest account of MacIntyre's fairly complex relation to liberal democracy.

2.1. Sociological and political communitarianism

The notion of communitarianism carries at least two fairly different meanings, depending on whether it qualifies a sociological or a political doctrine.

As a sociological doctrine, communitarianism asserts that the human self is constituted by collective values rooted in the history of a particular community. As MacIntyre puts it, "What I am ... is in key part what I inherit, a specific past that is present to some degree in my present" (AV, 221). Sylvie Mesure and Alain Renaut suggest that this remark illustrates in "ideal-typical fashion" the communitarian doctrine of the social construction of the self.¹⁵ Discarding the modern belief that "I am what I myself choose to be" (AV, 220), MacIntyre urges that the human self is in no way detachable from its social and historical setting: "the story of my life," he says, "is always embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity" (AV, 221).

Does this understanding of the human self hurt any major tenet of liberal democracy? It certainly affects some classical ways of providing theoretical foundations to the institutions and discursive practices of liberal democracy. But such foundational theories have been for long abandoned by liberal political philosophers

themselves. As Charles Taylor and Richard Rorty have both argued, "a conception of the self that makes the community constitutive of the self does comport well with liberal democracy."¹⁶ Michael Walzer likewise observes that contemporary liberal democrats "are not committed to a presocial self."¹⁷ The central issue at stake in the discussions between liberals and communitarians is not the social "constitution" of the self—which is largely admitted on both sides as a mere given—, but the "connection" that ought to be established among "constituted selves."¹⁸ The central issue, in other words, is not sociological, but political.

While the purpose of sociological communitarianism remains essentially descriptive, the normative proposals of political communitarianism might be perceived as highly controversial from a liberal point of view. But again, the question whether political communitarianism constitutes a threat to liberal democracy cannot simply be answered by "yes" or "no." As is well known, the informal group of political philosophers whose names are commonly associated with communitarianism¹⁹ do hardly agree upon what this label is supposed to refer to, and many of them—MacIntyre included—refuse even the label itself. Some further distinctions must therefore be established within political communitarianism itself.

¹⁶ Richard Rorty, "The Priority of Philosophy to Democracy," in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth. Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 179. Rorty here approvingly comments on Charles Taylor's claim that "a conception of the self that ... makes 'the community constitutive of the individual' does in fact comport better with liberal democracy than does the Enlightenment conception of the self." See Charles Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences, Philosophical Papers*, vol. 2 (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 8.

¹⁷ Michael Walzer, "The Communitarian Critique of Liberalism," *Political Theory*, February 1990, vol. 18, no. 1, p. 21.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Michael Sandel, Charles Taylor, and Michael Walzer are frequently identified as major representatives of this "group" alongside MacIntyre. See for instance Mesure and Renaut, *Alter Ego*, pp. 14-15.

¹⁵ *Alter Ego*, p. 102, n. 2.

2.2. Moral-political and legal-political communitarianism

The French philosopher Justine Lacroix distinguishes two possible definitions of the political community. Political communities, she suggests, are all at once *moral* and *legal* communities.²⁰ The moral community is the social, geographical and cultural unit in which individuals live and find some sense of collective identity. The legal community is the formal frame in which public policies are applicable to members of a civil collectivity. This distinction shall help us to clarify the major ambiguity affecting the notion of “political communitarianism.” When using these words, we should always wonder whether we intend to address moral or legal issues. Both indeed are political. But as the political community includes both the moral and the legal communities, political communitarianism embraces two quite different sorts of political doctrines. Let us describe the first as “moral-political” and the second as “legal-political.”

Moral-political communitarianism endeavours to establish how virtues are to be exercised and transmitted within the political community. It finds its classical expression in Aristotle's *Politics* (III, 9): insofar as the end of the political community is not life alone but the good life, the city is not merely an “alliance” meant to prevent the citizens “from being wronged by anyone, nor again for purposes of exchange and mutual utility.”²¹ A “good state of law” requires, on Aristotle's view, that the citizens “concentrate their attention on political virtue and vice.” “It is manifest,” he says, “that the city truly and not verbally so called must make virtue its care.”²² This moral conception of the political community is at the heart of the antagonism MacIntyre

establishes “between liberal individualism in some version or other and the Aristotelian tradition in some version or other” (AV, 259).

Legal-political communitarianism endeavours to determine how political communities relate to the state's institutions and politics. It has been articulated in two quite contrasted, not to say contradictory, doctrines: the one demands a plurality of collective rights to be recognized within the legal-political frame of the state's institutions; the other demands this very same frame to be conceived in “nonneutralist” terms as one in which individuals share a single conception of the common good, and collectively pursue that good. While the first is mainly concerned with warranting cultural plurality, the second is rather preoccupied with securing social cohesion. Only the first of these two legal-political doctrines provides the notion of communitarianism with some innovative content; the second tends to obliterate any difference between communitarianism and civic republicanism.²³

2.2.1. The question of collective rights

In its pluralist or multicultural form, legal-political communitarianism deals essentially with the notion of collective rights—and, most notoriously, with some of its controversial outcomes in politics of preference or affirmative action. When the word “communitarianism” is mentioned in contemporary French public debates, it is almost exclusively this sort of issues that comes under discussion. The French philosopher Alain Renaut offers a good illustration of such exclusiveness in his very definition of the communitarian purpose: “all communitarian theories,” so he argues, pursue the same objec-

²⁰ Justine Lacroix, *Michael Walzer: Le pluralisme et l'universel* (Paris: Michalon, 2001), p. 90. Unlike Walzer, whose political theory requires a relation of congruence between these two conceptions of the political community, Lacroix urges that they need to be carefully distinguished.

²¹ *The Politics of Aristotle*, Translated with introduction, analysis, and notes, by Peter L. Phillips Simpson (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), p. 92.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 93.

²³ As Michael Walzer puts it, “a revival of neoclassical republicanism provides much of the substance of contemporary communitarian politics” (“The Communitarian Critique of Liberalism,” p. 19). On this overlapping of “communitarian” and “republican” concerns, see also Alain Renaut, *Libéralisme politique et pluralisme culturel* (Paris: Pleins Feux, 1999), pp. 60-66 and Justine Lacroix, “Les nationaux-républicains de gauche et la construction européenne,” *Le Banquet* no. 15, November 2000, pp. 157-168.

tive, namely a political shift from a society knowing no other rights than those of the individuals to a society that confers collective rights upon the groups and communities of which it is composed.²⁴ In Renaut's view, attaining this objective would involve the dismissal of one of the most basic requirements of liberal democracy: the commitment to confer equal rights on all individuals by disregarding their cultural and social distinctiveness.

How does MacIntyre's political philosophy relate to these issues? Renaut identifies it as a blatantly "anti-modern" and "anti-liberal" version of political communitarianism,²⁵ which he distinguishes from a "moderate communitarianism"²⁶ exemplified by Charles Taylor's attempt to open political liberalism to a more "hospitable" attitude toward cultural and religious diversity. But as far as the issue of collective rights is concerned, Renaut seems to make no essential difference between these two versions of political communitarianism. A more or less articulated demand for some recognition of collective rights is shared, so he assumes, by "all communitarian theories." This assumption, however, can hardly claim to be drawn from an exhaustive analysis of what *all* these theories actually say about collective rights. I rather suspect it to proceed from an unformulated *a fortiori* argument, which might be articulated as follows: since even Taylor's *moderate* version of the communitarian theory seems to involve some kind of timid approval of the notion of collective rights, MacIntyre's *radical* version of the same theory must do so to a much larger extent.

This argument, however, fails to appreciate the qualitative leap that separates moral-political from legal-political communitarianism. Renaut argues that Taylor's reflections on linguistic

identity show—in certain texts at least²⁷—a tacit endorsement of the idea of collective rights.²⁸ But can this be said of MacIntyre's ethics of the virtues? The quasi-Benedictine communities he awaits have no vocation to claim any kind of *rights* whatsoever, be they collective or not. Their sole vocation is rather to cultivate the virtues in the margins of the dominant political order, which MacIntyre emphatically compares to the declining Roman empire. Though in *After Virtue* he remains quite evasive about the legal-political implications of his ethics of the virtues, he has later expressed a number of "skeptical doubts" about "affirmative action" in particular and about the legal outcomes of "communitarian" politics in general.²⁹ Notwithstanding his provocative anti-liberal rhetoric, his call for a renewed allegiance to the tradition of virtues does not pave the way for a legal-political project involving the recognition of collective rights.

2.2.2. *The question of the state's neutrality*

Grant that the Aristotelian tradition MacIntyre endeavours to retrieve is chiefly concerned with virtues and not with collective rights, but we still need to wonder whether his moral-political philosophy is conceivable without some legal-political understanding of the "common good" or, in other words, some nonneutralist conception of the state? In "A Partial Response to my Critics" (1994), MacIntyre offers a brief reminder of the long lasting debate about this issue that has been initiated by Michael Sandel's dis-

²⁷ *Alter Ego*, p. 132, note 36.

²⁸ *Alter Ego*, p. 141 : "Taylor poursuit ... un flirt assez poussé avec l'idée de droits collectifs ..., [mais] témoigne ... assurément d'une grande habileté stratégique à ne pas franchir la ligne rouge de l'antilibéralisme." Renaut has recently proposed a slightly more appreciative reassessment of Taylor's position. See *Qu'est-ce qu'un peuple libre?*, p. 212.

²⁹ "I'm not a Communitarian, But..." *The Responsive Community*, vol. 1 (3), 1991, pp. 91-92 ; "Some Skeptical Doubts", in S. M. Cahn (ed.), *Affirmative Action in the University* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), p. 264-268; "The Spectre of Communitarianism," *Radical Philosophy* 70, pp. 34-35.

²⁴ Alain Renaut, "Le multiculturalisme est-il un humanisme?" in Lukas K. Sosoe (ed.), *Diversité humaine: Démocratie, multiculturalisme et citoyenneté* (Québec and Paris : Les Presses de l'Université Laval and L'Harmattan, 2002), p. 108.

²⁵ *Alter Ego*, p. 165.

²⁶ Alongside Taylor, Renaut mentions Michael Walzer as another major representative of this "moderate communitarianism." See *Qu'est-ce qu'un peuple libre ?*, p. 210. See also *Alter Ego*, pp. 104-105.

cussion of John Rawl's *Theory of Justice* in the early 1980s.³⁰

Where liberals have characteristically insisted that government within a nation-state should remain neutral between rival conceptions of the human good, contemporary communitarians have urged that such government should give expression to some shared vision of the human good, a vision defining some kind of community. Where liberals have characteristically urged that it is in the activities of subordinate voluntary associations, such as those constituted by religious groups, that shared visions of the good should be articulated, communitarians have insisted that the nation itself through the institutions of the nation-state ought to be constituted to some degree as a community.³¹

This is in fact a rather descriptive account of the "communitarian" plea for a nonneutralist state. How does MacIntyre himself address this issue? If we keep in mind his insistence that political communities are to be defined as communities in which the human good is to be pursued, thus requiring some agreement on a substantive conception of the good, we might expect him to endorse the views he describes here as "communitarian." Yet MacIntyre declares in quite unambiguous terms that he has "strongly dissociated [him]self whenever [he] had an opportunity to do so" from such views about the liberal state: "[C]ommunitarians," he says, "have attacked liberals on one issue on which liberals have been consistently in the right."³² No less than these "liberals" with whom he disagrees on so many other issues, MacIntyre firmly rejects the nonneutralist conception of the state advocated by their "communitarian" critics. Why? Because these critics "advance their proposals as a contribution to the politics of the nation-state."³³ A modern nation-state conceived as an all-

inclusive community whose members would be asked to share a substantive conception of the human good appears to MacIntyre as a political monstrosity threatening to engender totalitarian ills.³⁴

As Mark Murphy has persuasively argued, "[t]he space in which common goods are possible is, in MacIntyre's view, the space of practices"³⁵ in which "internal goods tend to be common goods and external goods private goods."³⁶ This cannot be accomplished with state politics, for it is only on the small scale of local communities that politics can be "conceived and carried out as a practice."³⁷ It is indeed in such local political communities—which are illustrated with examples ranging "from some kinds of ancient city and some kinds of medieval commune to some kinds of modern cooperative farming and fishing enterprises"—that "social relationships" can be "informed by a shared allegiance to the goods internal to communal practices, so that the uses of power and wealth are subordinated to the achievement of those goods."³⁸

Conclusion

MacIntyre's insistence on the practice-based character of local communities lies at the very heart of his distrust in the politics of those whom he calls the "communitarians." Their distinctive mistake, he argues, lies in their endeavour to transform into state politics the modes of deliberation and participation that are specific to the

³⁰ Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1982).

³¹ "A Partial Response to My Critics," in John Horton and Susan Mendus (eds.), *After MacIntyre: Critical Perspectives on the Work of Alasdair MacIntyre* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), p. 302.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 303.

³⁵ Marc C. Murphy, "MacIntyre's Political Philosophy," in Marc C. Murphy (ed.), *Alasdair MacIntyre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 161. I am also deeply indebted to Murphy's illuminating comments (p. 159) on the excerpts quoted from "A Partial Response to My Critics" in the preceding paragraph.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

³⁸ Alasdair MacIntyre, "Introduction. 1953, 1968, 1995: Three perspectives," in *Marxism and Christianity* (London: Duckworth, 1968; second edition 1995), p. xxvii.

practices of local communities.³⁹ Using our own terminology, we could just as well say that MacIntyre castigates his communitarian fellow philosophers for drawing undue legal-political conclusions from their correct moral-political premises.

MacIntyre's fascination for local politics has been explained from a biographical perspective as a mere remnant of his earlier commitment to the British tradition of anti-state socialism that he has contributed to renovate as a New Left activist in the late 1950s and early 1960s.⁴⁰ On MacIntyre's own account, however, his radical turn to the politics of local community seems to have occurred only much later, by the time he had abandoned his Marxist "belief that the only possible politics that could effectively respond to the injustices of a capitalist economic and social order was a politics that took for granted the institutional forms of the modern state and that had its goal in the conquest of state power, whether by electoral or by other means."⁴¹

MacIntyre's emphatic appeal to a "new St. Benedict" in the conclusion of *After Virtue* can be read as the hyperbolic expression of this profound disillusion about state politics. His stance has been repeatedly criticized for lacking any political ambition that could be opposed as a viable alternative to the state institutions of liberal democracy. Richard Rorty has argued that *After Virtue*'s proposal ends up in some "terminal wistfulness"⁴² and Jeffrey Stout has confirmed this diagnosis in deploring the "implicitly utopian character" of the book: "When you unwrap the utopia," he writes, "the batteries aren't included."⁴³ Interestingly enough, MacIntyre does

not defend himself against the "charge of utopianism." In *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, he urges that this charge, "sometimes at least, has a very different import from that which is conventionally ascribed to it" and he polemically suggests that, on some occasions, "the gap between Utopia and current social reality" provides a measure, "not of the lack of justification of Utopia," but rather of the constricted vision of "those who not only inhabit contemporary social reality but insist upon seeing only what it allows them to see and upon learning only what it allows them to learn."⁴⁴

This quite confrontational apology of utopianism is remarkably consistent with the conclusion of *After Virtue*. But the case could be made that it is precisely because MacIntyre grants the utopian character of his expectations about an alternative social order that he refuses to apply to state politics the modes of deliberation and participation that he ascribes to local politics and to the Utopia they are meant to anticipate. MacIntyre has always explicitly refused to provide any large-scale alternative to the governmental institutions of liberal democracy. Although he holds them to be insufficiently democratic in regard to the "hyperdemocratic" standards of local politics,⁴⁵ he does not believe that they should be abandoned or even reformed. In *Dependent Rational Animals*, he affirms that the modern state is not to be removed from our political landscape.⁴⁶ In *After Virtue*, he also admits that there are "many tasks only to be performed in and through government which still require performing: the rule of law, so far as it is possible in a modern state, has to be vindicated, injustice and unwarranted suffering have to be dealt with,

³⁹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999), p. 142.

⁴⁰ See Emile Perreau-Saussine, *Alasdair MacIntyre. Une biographie intellectuelle* (Paris: PUF, 2005), p. 51.

⁴¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, "Introduction. 1953, 1968, 1995: Three Perspectives," in *Marxism and Christianity* (London: Duckworth, 1968, 1995²), p. xv.

⁴² Richard Rorty, "The Priority of Philosophy", p. 194.

⁴³ Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics After Babel. The Languages of Morals and their Discontents* (Boston: Beacon Press,

1988; second edition with a new postscript, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 229.

⁴⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry, Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), pp. 234-235.

⁴⁵ See Marc Boss, "Alasdair MacIntyre's Hyperdemocratic Critique of Liberal Democracy," in *The Janus Faces of Religion: European Perspectives on the Religion-State Relationship*, Bert Broeckaert and Christoph Jedan (eds.), forthcoming in 2009.

⁴⁶ *Dependent Rational Animals*, p. 133.

generosity has to be exercised, and liberty has to be defended, in ways that are sometimes only possible through the use of governmental institutions" (AV, 255).⁴⁷

How, then, are these concessions about the necessity of the "modern state" to be combined with MacIntyre's fervent attention to the politics of local community? His conception of local politics leaves in fact a certain room for what Murphy calls a "statelike system of institutions."⁴⁸ As Murphy convincingly shows, such a system can be pragmatically justified from within MacIntyre's logic of local politics on the basis of a threefold argument: firstly, "communities practicing local politics would rationally want a provision of external goods;" secondly, "an effective provision of external goods can be better brought about through an institution that crosses the boundaries of local communities;" and thirdly, "deliberation within such an institution would have to be far thinner than deliberation within any local community."⁴⁹

Since the very same description could be applied to a classically liberal conception of the state, one might wonder why MacIntyre seems so persistently reluctant to formulate any forthright commitment to liberal democracy. As Émile Perreau-Saussine rightly observes, MacIntyre finally accepts liberal democracy, but less by choice than by some sort of resignation; while he tacitly acknowledges the legitimacy of the liberal state, he refuses to recognize its social, moral, or spiritual value; he half-heartedly accepts liberalism "as a political solution, but only as a political solution and only because there is no alternative."⁵⁰

⁴⁷ See also "Introduction. 1953, 1968, 1995: Three Perspectives," in *Marxism and Christianity*, p. xxi: "Those liberals who are social democrats aspire to construct institutions in the trade union movement and the welfare state that will enable workers to participate in capitalist prosperity. And it would be absurd to deny that the achievement of pensions, health services and unemployment benefits for workers under capitalism has always been a great and incontrovertible good."

⁴⁸ "MacIntyre's Political Philosophy," p. 174.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 174-175.

⁵⁰ *Alasdair MacIntyre. Une biographie intellectuelle*, pp. 34, 53, 61.

To be sure, the lack of an alternative to liberal democracy is not supposed to be the end of the story told in *After Virtue*. Ironically, however, its last words raise the yet unanswered question as to whether the waiting for this alternative will prove less deceptive than the endless waiting for Godot in Becket's play.⁵¹

⁵¹ This article is the extended version of a lecture delivered under a slightly different title ("Who's Afraid of Communitarianism? A critical Appraisal of Alasdair MacIntyre's Ethics of Virtue") at a doctoral seminar organized on 15 May 2005 at the Centre for Religious Studies of the University of Lund. I owe my warmest thanks to the organizers, Prof. Catharina Stenqvist and Dr. Patrik Fridlund, and to the other members of that seminar whose insightful discussion of my proposals has contributed to their final formulation.