

PhD Theses

Possibilities of a *Community*-based Social Criticism

The 'After Virtue' Project

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I. Research Objectives

In the English speaking world, political philosophy had been dominated by the liberal-communitarian debate for decades. In retrospect, it seems that the rival positions can be easily defined. The contending parties either fell into line with the Rawlsian theory advocating the individual rights or, in the name of community, propagated the idea of common good. After all, it would be misleading to read the so-called communitarian authors (Michael Walzer, Michael Sandel, Charles Taylor and Alasdair MacIntyre) only in the context of this debate as basing their arguments on similar considerations and carrying the same intentions.

Since the importance of confrontation with Rawls has been overemphasized and the Hungarian reception of the debate has also been one-sided, we are prevented from exploring the vital points of the communitarian theories. For that very reason it is also easy to accuse them of their vocabulary – terms like 'common good', 'community' and 'good life' – indicating the violation of dignity and freedom of each member of a society. However, according to the critics, these terms have remained merely fictional, for the communitarians failed to explicate the meaning of them. Whatever efforts they have made, the communitarians were not able to provide accurate definitions since the very nature of their investigations, the contextualism, leaves room only for either relativism and subjectivism or supporting of the existing institutions and practices in a conservative manner. Both of these alternatives preclude the possibility of providing normative background for their critiques and of showing how a communitarian community could function.

My question therefore is whether any kind of *community*-based political philosophy can be elaborated. In summarize, the aim of my investigation is to follow up MacIntyre's 'After Virtue' project hoping to disclose the possibilities of one (or more) community-based social criticism.

Having traced this project I expect to respond to the objections mentioned above and to make it clear that the appeal to the notions of 'common values', 'shared understandings'

and to the conception of ‘common deliberation’ do not rob the moral and political thinking – more exactly: the practice of thinking – of its critical force.

II. Research Methodology

My line of enquiry follows a simple method. The first chapter deals with the communitarian diagnose of “modernity’s illness”. In the second chapter I analyze the method with the help of which the therapy can be developed. The dissertation ends with the analyses of MacIntyre’s “proposal”.

Nevertheless, I am concerned with communitarian considerations, arguments and the charges raised against communitarianism in general, only in the context of MacIntyre’s project, hence the perspective of the investigation into communitarian principles, notions and basic conceptions is also limited, although they may be of great importance in elaborating a coherent and consistent *community*-based political philosophy.

Actually, I intend to respond only one of the objections, however the most important one, for it makes doubtful whether any kind of *community*-based political theory is possible to be elaborated. This scepticism is based upon the tension between the common deliberation of values, and the inherited social identity, its embeddedness within a tradition, which dominates the theoretical grounds, the normative considerations and the analytical methods of communitarian investigations of socio-political practices. Furthermore this tension is seen as irresolvable. So it is not a coincidence or merely a deficiency that the questions, related to the policy of a communitarian community and the content of its values, have never been answered.

In my dissertation I describe how MacIntyre tries to overcome the oppositions concerning the effectiveness of a *community*-based social criticism and that of liberalism by taking the road from the menacing image of society set down in *After Virtue*, towards the disclosure of the normative grounds of the critique. This road passes through the historical arguments and metaethical theses formulated in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* and in *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* towards the volume of *Dependent Rational Animals*, where MacIntyre offers more or less clear answers as to what the ideas *also* dominating the communitarian imagination mean for him and how a constitutive community, governed by the politics of common good, can be organized and maintained.

So I undertake the task to follow up MacIntyre's way that not only leads further than it seemed in the beginning but also has more difficulties in store for MacIntyre than he has expected. After all, he guides us from metaethics to normative ethics, from the social criticism embedded in the critique of modernity to its normative background. In the picture, though it is not still sharp enough, the narrow path toward political philosophy – more exactly: toward the political thinking and practice – also appears.

III. New Results and Theses

The first chapter, after sketching the main steps of 'After virtue' project, deals with the communitarian and especially the MacIntyreian diagnose of "modernity's illness".

My aim here is to free from the liberal-communitarian debate formulated around the Rawlsian theory of justice those considerations and arguments that may serve the basis of a one (or more) *community*-based political philosophy. In order to achieve this, I try to determine the phenomenon the criticism target and prove that many of the questions raised during the debate are valid in different contexts, and the so called communitarianism can not be reduced to one body of homogeneous doctrine. However, the object of the analysis of the first chapter is MacIntyre's ominous description of contemporary moral situation. After reconstructing of his diagnosis and his preliminary considerations according to the therapy, I show how the socially teleological language of moral reasoning evoked by MacIntyre prevents him from overcoming the disarray of our moral situation and the fragmentation of our moral discourses.

The criticism of liberalism embedded in that of the modernity is not only more sweeping and radical but also sharper in MacIntyre's work than in Walzer's, Sandel's and Taylor's theory, and I intend to point out that it can lead to misunderstanding about the very nature of communitarian statements. From the viewpoint of my investigation the most important fact is that all of the so-called communitarians consider the liberal theories (along with the liberal practice) as the inheritors of the Enlightenment project and agree that moral skepticism is the basic feature of our culture since the foundationalist model of everyday moral reasoning has proved to be futile due to its impersonal criteria being unjustifiable.

The point of the diagnosis is that the concept of telos and the notion of 'man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-essential-nature' have been eliminated from the once coherent

scheme of morality which provided framework for judgments and choices. Once the functional notion of 'man' vanishes and 'man' can not be understood in terms of aims and roles, facts and values can easily be separated. As inheritors of disparate traditions, we can but appeal to incoherent fragments not only in making moral and political judgments, but also in making up the narratives of our lives.

If man – deprived of the concept of good life and telos – lacks sensitivity to temporal embeddedness, the narrative unity of his life will fall apart and the social dimension of his identity will also be injured.

What MacIntyre propose is revitalize the 'socially' teleological language of moral reasoning. My further analyses point out that this language is too 'empty' to provide useful guidelines for creating particular patterns of good life since virtues in this case has not been defined in relation to a pre-determined telos, but in connection with internal goods of various practices, as a matter of fact, with the *quest* for the good. That is, telos is the unity of the narrative itself which is the individual life. In this narrative, goods, obtainable for the members of practices, are ordered in a specific hierarchy. This means that the socially teleological scheme of virtues can be filled with several different catalogues of virtues, so goods which we are able to quest for and obtain only by possessing certain virtues could embody different conflicting values. Thus teleological framework itself do not unconditionally remedy one of the gravest maladies of our fragmented moral world, that is, the privatization of the good, in the course of which elaborating, defending and even living out of particular conceptions of good life are confined to the private realm and can not be the objects of public deliberations.

In the second chapter I analyze the (remedial) method with the help of which the normative deliberations, serving the base for *community*-based criticism, can be explained.

With the help of Walzer I show how *community*-based anthropological considerations (the temporal and social embeddedness of the Self, the fixed nature of the context of practical thought) determine and limit the perspective of critical doubt. Then I deal with the prevalent objections raised against the communitarian method. The most important of these is that the critical intentions are deprived of their force by the very nature of the notion of tradition-based practical reasoning and the emphasizing of social and historical embeddedness of the identity. If common meanings and beliefs are taken as a starting point of the argument and the critic does not even intend to detach from them in order to take a 'no particular point of view',

he, equipped with the interpretative method, has no choice but to accept and justify to what he has taken objection, that is, to get stuck in the liberal, individualist world. Otherwise he can not escape from appealing to universalistic criteria which he considers to be misleading. Consequently, neither does MacIntyre have chance to fill in his teleological structure with content which derived from other sources than our distorted moral world.

In the following, I argue that objections of this kind seem compelling only when generalized, homogeneous communitarian claims are placed at the background of MacIntyre's diagnose, while communitarian critiques are based on different considerations and make various proposals.

I am primarily concerned with MacIntyre's method, that is, with how MacIntyre's understanding of the relation between moral judgment and tradition balances between the subjectivism-relativism of the genealogic method and the universalism of Enlightenment rationalism. My analyses make it clear that the investigations into context-bound, shared meanings do not lose their critical force.

MacIntyre defends the Thomist conception of moral enquiry against its two principal adversaries. One of them is the encyclopaedic tradition which is convinced to have reached universal criteria of moral adjudication, pretending to transcend all traditions, and the other is the genealogical enquiry with its skepticism and relativism, due to which it renounces any kind of methods. In contrast with them, Thomism lays equal emphasis on the truth for which practical reasoner is searching and the tradition from which he is not able to detach completely. It is exactly to this that, according to MacIntyre, Thomism owes its superiority. The encyclopaedical method of moral argument is made closed and blind by its lacking any sense of history and its commitment to a supposedly context-independent, universally valid notion of rationality, whereas Nietzschean, genealogical approach claims that there is no such thing as objective truth, so it is no use trying to reach certitude of any kind since we can not get rid of the chains that bound us to a particular community and history.

According to MacIntyre rational reasoning always appeals to the goods which we attain or achieve by engaging in practices arranged by traditions. These goods internal to practices serve as the sources of our choices and decisions, as well as formulating problems and solutions. It does not mean, however, that standards of rational evaluation are invulnerable, for practical reasoning is itself not only tradition-constituted but also tradition-constitutive, that is, it is both constituted by and constitutive of a tradition.

MacIntyre argues that in different traditions, any claims concerning the truth are justified by appealing incompatible and often incommensurable standards, though none of the traditions regard them as being relative. Although it is impossible for an adherent of a tradition to appeal a single, tradition-transcendent, universal and neutral criterion of rationality, he can consistently invoke *the* truth in the course of reasoning.

Justification in fact consists in narrating how tradition-constitutive beliefs, practices and institutions had been embodied in a particular tradition and how this tradition preserved its continuity after having encountered rival ones. The aim of MacIntyre's analysis is 'merely' to show from where the debate has to be started, that is, that we are able to carry on dialogue on the ground of tradition alone. So histories of rival traditions not only can be, but should be written in order to avoid their becoming Burkiean traditions which are hostile of reason and confrontations.

The dissertation ends with the analyses of MacIntyre's "proposal".

I show, that the revitalization of the Thomist notion of ethical argumentation, the understanding of independent, practical reasoner as a vulnerable animal is not only of central importance to comprehending the 'after virtue' project but essential to the success of a *community*-based political philosophy.

Since influence and power of Thomist tradition advocated by MacIntyre is not so apparent in our age, his proposal needs more support in order to be acceptable than referring to the continuity, consistency and coherency of Thomistic Aristotelianism. He has to show exactly which elements of this tradition are available for us here and now and how they can fill up the teleological scheme of virtues. That is, MacIntyre has to reveal the truth of his own Thomism, in defence of which he will be able to take the field not only for traditions generally, but against the rival ones.

In the course of his investigation the teleological structure is filled up with content and the normative theory thus evolved from previous metaethical considerations provides definite guidelines for moral reasoning. To reach this goal MacIntyre changes his position, accepts Aristotle's biological teleology, and claims that virtues can not be understood without reference to human's biological nature. So in *Dependent Rational Animals* MacIntyre focuses on the main features of human nature, namely, man's animality, dependency and rationality. Emphasizing our vulnerability and disability, he makes more subtle connection between these aspects of human existence than to summarize with the notion of moral education. In this

combination the setting for the ‘good life’ is not merely the community of potentially and actually independent practical reasoners, but networks of giving and receiving.

Thus investigations into the operation of the networks, along with analysis of the nature of virtues that establish and maintain the relations of this kind, are of crucial importance to comprehending the ‘after virtue’ project – if it is comprehensible at all. Nevertheless, following up MacIntyre’s way, we not only come to a better understanding of what flourishing means to a vulnerable, imperfect being, and how individual goods can interweave with common goods, but we also can gain a clearer insight into what social and political arrangement and institutional structure make possible to identify and achieve these goods. In short: MacIntyre suggests a plausible, though not satisfactory answer to the question of how a constitutive community governed by the politics of common good can be organized and maintained, and renders relevant, but not full response to the critical challenges against communitarianism.

PUBLISHED PAPERS RELATED TO THESESES

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