

*Marian Kuna*

## MacIntyre's Search for a Defensible Aristotelian Ethics and the Role of Metaphysics\*

*Abstract:* MacIntyre is a major defender of the resurgence of the Aristotelian approach in ethical and political theory. He considers Aristotelianism not only a feasible, but also an intellectually superior alternative to most contemporary dominant ideologies, and to liberalism in particular. There is, however, an important and instructive modification to his view of what is admissible from Aristotle that should be accounted for. The paper traces MacIntyre's search for a defensible restatement of the Aristotelian ethics and examines in particular his changing attitude to metaphysics as the basis for ethics within his project. Different stages of the development to his proposed Aristotelian alternative are analyzed and evaluated. The paper tries to show that despite the fact that MacIntyre initially repudiated Aristotle's metaphysical biology, nevertheless his account has always been (implicitly or explicitly) metaphysical.

### 0. Introduction

There has been a revival of interest in Aristotelian ethics.<sup>1</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre is one of the most prominent contemporary advocates of Aristotle and thus the

---

\* I am greatly indebted to the Nanovic Institute for European Studies of the Notre Dame University, IN, USA for hosting me as a visiting fellow January through May 2006. I would like to express my special thanks to the institute's director Prof. James McAdams for his kind hospitality. This research visit undoubtedly provided me with invaluable time and very favourable conditions for critically reconsidering the argument of this paper. I would like to extend my gratitude also to Dr. Daniel McNerny of Notre Dame's Center for Ethics and Culture for his enriching comments on the previous version of this paper. Of course, I take full responsibility for the flaws that remain.

<sup>1</sup> We have witnessed the revival of a whole variety of normative ethical thinking, such as neo-consequentialism, neo-deontology, contractarianism, and the like in the second half of the last century in ethical theory. Different versions of neo-Aristotelianism have also been advanced. There are various reasons why philosophers turn their attention in their search for a sound moral theory to virtue theories of the past and to Aristotle in particular. The following three reasons for this turn to moral theorizing within the framework of a virtue theory were advanced: first, an increasingly widespread feeling of a moral crisis in our society; second, increase of our historical consciousnesses; and finally, the fact that modern moral theories were considered as incomplete. See Kotva 1996, 5–12. The nature of modern virtue ethics, its place among the two other dominant approaches in contemporary normative theory (deontology and consequentialism) as well as its similarities and dissimilarities with the two are instructively presented by D. Solomon. See Solomon 1995. There is also a book in Slovak by Dagmar Smreková and Zuzana Palovičová that traces this development in the area of English and French moral philosophy published under the title *Dobro a cnosť. Etická tradícia*

answer to the question of the limits to his rehabilitation of the Stagirite may prove far-reaching in its implications for current moral thought. This paper's objective is to examine MacIntyre's search for a defensible Aristotelian ethics. So the main question here is not what can be considered an adequate formulation of the most fundamental ethical thought of Aristotle,<sup>2</sup> but rather the question how MacIntyre conceived the answer to this question. I believe that this task would require (among other things) showing how and why MacIntyre arrived at a tradition-based virtue ethics. This may be best understood when his analysis and critique of modernity and modern morality, along with his own moral theory, are examined. MacIntyre's mature position on the issue in question needs also be taken into consideration.

Therefore I will proceed in my article as follows. First, I will explain the core of MacIntyre's original meta-ethical argument—his understanding of the history of modern ethics. This part provides the background important for the proper understanding of his proposed alternative to modern moral theories. MacIntyre's analysis of the failure of the Enlightenment project of justifying morality is also considered. After that, I will describe the initial formulation of his moral theory—an Aristotelian virtue ethics, which is said to be able to remedy the ills of our condition. Thirdly, I will reconstruct briefly MacIntyre's further development of the notion of tradition. This development represents his increasingly positive attitude towards a distinctively Aristotelian metaphysics. Finally, I will put MacIntyre's major theses in context of his overall philosophical project and consider the role of metaphysics in his neo-Aristotelian restatement. I will conclude by stating that despite the fact that MacIntyre initially repudiated Aristotle's metaphysical biology his account has nevertheless always been (implicitly or explicitly) metaphysical.

## 1. MacIntyre's Reading of Modernity

MacIntyre's analysis expresses his deep dissatisfaction with modernity on the theoretical as well as the practical level. He starts with the claim that contemporary moral disagreement is tied to the fact that our language of morality is in a "state of grave disorder" (MacIntyre 1985, 2). Modern culture, then, is one where any sound (and traditional) comprehension of morality is almost completely lost.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, he claims that we live in the culture in which there seems to be "no rational way of securing moral agreement" (MacIntyre 1985,

---

a súčasnosť' [The Good and Virtue. The Ethical Tradition and the Present, the title translation: m.k.], Smreková/Palovičová 2003.

<sup>2</sup> It is clear that to do so would require identifying what can justifiably be considered the "most fundamental ethical thought of Aristotle". For the moment it is essential to bear in mind that this question as well as the question of what MacIntyre believes is the most defensible version of Aristotelian ethics must be clearly distinguished from the question of the defensibility of Aristotelianism itself that goes beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>3</sup> MacIntyre does not claim that currently there is no moral theory or morality, but rather that the nature of contemporary moral disagreement creates an impression that there can be no *rational* way of arriving at agreement on the most fundamental moral issues.

6).<sup>4</sup> Emotivism—claiming that “all evaluative judgments and more specifically all moral judgments are *nothing but* expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling, insofar as they are moral or evaluative in character”—is said to be the basic feature of the culture we inhabit (MacIntyre 1985, 11–12).<sup>5</sup> MacIntyre rejects emotivism as false.<sup>6</sup> Rather he suggests the following historical narrative of modern ethics.<sup>7</sup>

Modern ethics starts with the rejection of the Aristotelian physical and metaphysical conceptual framework. This is very important, as Aristotle developed a comprehensive worldview in which all spheres of human experience are covered in a single interconnected system. It is the system where physics and metaphysics are united into one overall scheme alongside politics and ethics. Moreover, within this scheme the metaphysical analysis of human nature is inseparable from ethics.<sup>8</sup> However, once the modern science of Galileo and Newton discredited Aristotelian physics, Aristotelian teleological explanatory framework was replaced by a mechanistic view of nature in which there is no place for natural ends, and so the rest of the Aristotelian scheme could not remain unaffected either.<sup>9</sup> The Aristotelian final cause appeared to this new physics, predominantly concerned only with measurable aspects of physical reality, only as an outmoded relic of the past (MacIntyre 1985, 50–61, 81, 83). Therefore, the coexistence of non-teleological physics and teleological ethics became a serious problem.

Modern thinkers realized this and attempted to secure the content and form of traditional morality. MacIntyre calls their attempts “the Enlightenment project of justifying morality” (MacIntyre 1985, 36).<sup>10</sup> He claims not only that this project failed, but also that it had to fail, and he explains why. MacIntyre starts with the explanation of Aristotle's ethical scheme. It consisted of three key elements.<sup>11</sup> First, there was some picture of ‘man-as-he-happens-to-be’; second,

---

<sup>4</sup> MacIntyre provides three examples of interminability of our disagreement over certain moral issues. First, the question of abortion; second, the question of just war; finally, the question of social justice, MacIntyre 1985, 6–7.

<sup>5</sup> It is not only that the opinion that no rational way of securing moral agreement is available is prevailing, but even more, people's modes of behaviour presuppose the truth of emotivism, MacIntyre 1985, 22.

<sup>6</sup> MacIntyre's argument for the inadequacy of emotivism as an ethical theory as well as an explanation of the nature of our moral disagreement can be found in his *Short History of Ethics* (see MacIntyre 1988, 257–69) and in *After Virtue* (see MacIntyre 1985, 11–35) in particular.

<sup>7</sup> While in *Short History of Ethics* and in *After Virtue* MacIntyre speaks of the history of ethics, he later on recognized that it is more proper to speak of the history of Western ethics. Thus in my description of MacIntyre's story I also understand the issue this way.

<sup>8</sup> Not every Aristotelian scholar, however, will accept this. Timothy Roche, for instance, argues for the autonomy of ethics within Aristotle's overall scheme (see Roche 1988). I will say more about Roche's arguments in the final section of this paper.

<sup>9</sup> Though MacIntyre seems to be right in his description of the effects of the rejection of Aristotelian physics on the Aristotelian teleology, it is not that clear that the modern thinkers were completely right in assuming the devastating implications for this teleology.

<sup>10</sup> Some authors, e.g. Charles Larmore, have objected to MacIntyre's effort to present the Enlightenment thought as a homogeneous movement whose representatives believed that morality is an autonomous source of value, Larmore 1987, 31.

<sup>11</sup> Larmore objects to MacIntyre's ascribing this tripartite scheme to Aristotle, for Larmore argues that the exercise of virtue was not instrumental and to be added to happiness, but rather

some picture of ‘man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-essential-nature’, and finally, some ethical precepts (rules). These precepts were to enable man to come from the state of untutored human nature to the state where human beings achieve their proper excellence. This process is the process of actualization of human potentialities towards a peculiarly human *telos*. If a person is to realize his/her essential nature, s/he has to possess various virtues (dispositions) and avoid vices, which prevent him/her from achieving his/her true end-*telos* (MacIntyre 1985, 52–53). In this teleological scheme each of the three elements not only refers to the other two, but it is also intelligible only with reference to them.<sup>12</sup>

Once the modern mechanistic science does not, and even cannot, understand physical movement and change in terms of the actualization of object’s potentiality toward its final cause, ‘human objects’ cannot be seen as aspiring to achieve their final causes either. The three elements of a coherent ethical scheme were disconnected, and what remained was some notion of human beings, as they happen to be in fact. No notion of human beings as they would be if they achieved their essential nature was available any longer. That is why the last element of the scheme—ethical rules—came to appear arbitrary. For the context being radically modified they cannot have the function of enabling human beings to achieve their *telos* (53, 62).

Consequently, once the traditional justification of virtues and ethical rules is impossible, modern philosophers were supposed to meet the demand for their justification. MacIntyre mentions two of the most influential, but both equally unsuccessful, attempts to provide such a justification: utilitarianism and Kantianism. Whereas the former tried to devise a new teleology, identifying the natural *telos* of human beings with the prospect of maximum pleasure and the absence of pain, the latter tried to demonstrate that moral rules have a categorical character and authority grounded in the very nature of practical reason (62).

MacIntyre holds that their failure is rooted in their starting points. For these two approaches both started from an inconsistent mixture of inherited fragments of pre-modern views. In the absence of any *normative* conception of human nature these two philosophies could only build their ethical theories on fictions; utilitarianism on desires, Kantianism on pure rationality (257). This peculiarly modern ethical enterprise resulted in the discovery of the *individual*—the modern self understood as a moral atom (61).

MacIntyre claims that the failure of the Enlightenment project has brought about the muddle in our moral theory and practice and praises Nietzsche who radically unmasked all these modern moralities as having no real foundations (113). Therefore, MacIntyre suggests that after Nietzsche we can only choose

---

it was essential for happiness. And though Larmore does not fail to notice that MacIntyre acknowledges this, he nevertheless considers MacIntyre’s formulation “needlessly roundabout” (Larmore 1987, 33). I believe that there is something true in Larmore’s point, but I do not think it has any fatal consequences for MacIntyre’s argument.

<sup>12</sup> In addition MacIntyre stresses the point that it was not solely the new science which destroyed this scheme; but the new conception of reason developed within Protestantism and Jansenist Catholicism, in the late Middle Ages, also made this scheme vulnerable and prepared it for being rejected, MacIntyre 1985, 53–54.

*either* to follow him in his *non-rationalistic* ethics of will-to-power *or* go back to the Aristotelian scheme (MacIntyre 1985, 118). MacIntyre advocates the latter option, in which moral meaning is provided by a normative conception of human nature, as immune to Nietzsche's critique. This is because MacIntyre believes that some form of revived Aristotelianism is capable of providing a *rationaly* defensible moral standpoint (MacIntyre 1985, 256-259).<sup>13</sup> Therefore, it is MacIntyre's version of Aristotelianism to which I will now turn.

## 2. The Initial Formulation of the Aristotelian Alternative: Practice, Virtue and Tradition

MacIntyre's Aristotelian restatement requires (like any other Aristotelian restatement) at least two initial steps. First, to identify what it is in Aristotle's account of morality that is of constant value. Second, to modify or reject those elements of the system which cannot withstand rational criticism.<sup>14</sup> Now I will examine what MacIntyre thinks is to be accepted and what is to be rejected from Aristotle.

MacIntyre holds that Aristotle's overall moral scheme and his account of practical reasoning in particular are correct (MacIntyre 1985, 146-164). However, he does not accept some important elements of Aristotle's scheme. As the most controversial of them is seen Aristotle's *metaphysical biology* (taken as a fundamental background for his ethics) and it is condemned as false and rejected (58, 163, 196).<sup>15</sup> He further claims that some different and more adequate account of *telos* must be elaborated and that it is to be based on a different teleological account that will replace this sort of (false) biological foundation, namely

---

<sup>13</sup> I believe that this point deserves some attention, for it may be read in at least two ways. It may mean *either* that the neo-Aristotelianism can be *a* rational position among some other reasonable conceptions of the good life we experience in the contemporary pluralist moral world *or* that it is *the* rational conception of morality and of the good life. Whereas the former could be easily accepted (or even welcomed by many liberals), the latter, which I believe is what MacIntyre has in mind and what Aristotle would argue for, presents the view that goes against the very heart of the liberal creed.

<sup>14</sup> So far I have been talking of MacIntyre's restatement as if Aristotle was the only inspiration of his thought. However, it is important to bear in mind that whereas the hero of *After Virtue* is Aristotle, in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* and *Three Rival Versions* it is Aquinas who is seen as the culmination of the Aristotelian tradition. Moreover, Larmore argues interestingly that rather than Aristotle it is Sophocles who is the hero of *After Virtue*. This is because of Sophocles's recognition of the fact that moral conflicts are rationally interminable, which is something Aristotle does not and MacIntyre does firmly believe, Larmore 1987, 38.

<sup>15</sup> It is argued that MacIntyre's rejection of Aristotle's metaphysics is due to MacIntyre's belief that it cannot properly apprehend radical social conflict as a fundamental aspect of modern society, Knight 1998, 10. Two further problematic aspects of Aristotle thought. First, Aristotle's ethics, in Aristotle's own account inseparably tied with the structure of the *polis*, must be formulated in a way to fit our world with no city-states. Secondly, Aristotle's belief that a world inhabited only by good persons would be the world without a tragic hero is also rejected. For MacIntyre holds that this involves the incorrect claim that a tragic situation is a mere consequence of a flaw in practical intelligence resulting from inadequate possession or exercise of the virtues, MacIntyre 1985, 162-163.

a *socially* teleological account (163, 197). This is again in line with MacIntyre's strongly held view that "a moral philosophy [...] characteristically presupposes a sociology" (23) and so by the very same logic MacIntyre's approach "requires historically informed but somehow teleological sociology [...]" (Knight 1998, 10). This way MacIntyre believes his standpoint to be not only generally Aristotelian, but—due to his work of revision—also one that strengthens the case for Aristotelianism (MacIntyre 1985, 197).

This is, by and large, MacIntyre's starting point of his revisited Aristotelianism.<sup>16</sup> MacIntyre tries to preserve what he considers to be the sound core of Aristotle's moral theory, so as to enable us to solve the problems of modernity. His account is formulated through three related stages. First, the level of practice; second, the level of the narrative order of a single human life; and finally, the level of a moral tradition. Each latter stage presupposes the previous one but not *vice versa* (187).

The level of practice is the basic level for understanding of morality and exercise of the virtues. It is because an Aristotelian always understands one's excellence with reference to and in the context of some particular type of human activity or *practice*. Practice is the background for the definition of virtues, and is defined as

"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." (187)

What is essential about every particular practice is the fact that it provides persons involved in it with an opportunity to achieve goods internal to this particular practice. MacIntyre calls those goods internal because they can only be specified in terms of and achieved by experience in a given practice (188). There are also some external goods (money, power, fame, and the like) which, unlike internal goods, are attached to the practices only contingently.<sup>17</sup> Having defined "practice" and distinguished between two sorts of goods MacIntyre can proceed to the definition of a virtue; it is

"an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to prac-

---

<sup>16</sup> However, MacIntyre also uses for his restatement some of Aquinas's, broadly medieval, ideas which enriched the Aristotelian tradition. First, Aristotle's belief that achieving human happiness—*eudaimonia*—can be prevented by external misfortune is modified, so that unless we accomplice with evil we cannot be excluded from achieving the human good. Second, the essential historicity of medieval imagination - the man as being essentially *in via*—needs virtues, for they are "those qualities which enable men to survive evils on their historical journey", MacIntyre 1985, 175–176.

<sup>17</sup> Whereas the amount of the external goods is relatively limited, and their possession by someone means that fewer are available to others, the amount of internal goods is practically unlimited, MacIntyre 1985, 190.

tices and the lack of which effectively prevent us from achieving any such goods" (191).

Virtues are at the very heart of moral life, for they enable persons to achieve the internal goods of a society's various practices. Since there are many kinds of practice, each of them with its own peculiar goods, there must also be some way to order these various goods into a coherent scheme of one's life. MacIntyre offers his solution in the next stage.

That stage is the level of the narrative order of a single human life. On this level, to provide one's life with its proper unity is to envisage one's life as having a unity, which is "the unity of a narrative embodied in a single life" (218). The question "What is good for me?" is closely connected with the question "What is good for man?" (218). For, MacIntyre argues, if we take into account what all the answers to the former have in common, we ask the latter question. One's effort to answer these two questions provides one's life with a unity, which is "the unity of a narrative quest" (219).

MacIntyre, having said this, proceeds to his provisional definition of the good life for man. It is "the life spent in seeking for the good life for man, and the virtues necessary for the seeking are those which will enable us to understand what more and what else the good life for man is" (219).<sup>18</sup> However, since human beings cannot do this in isolation, as independent atoms, there are also some wider contexts, within which they find their place and derive their identity. These contexts—moral traditions—constitute MacIntyre's third stage.

So MacIntyre, having provided one's life with its narrative unity, proceeds to the final stage—the level of a moral tradition.<sup>19</sup> The context of a tradition provides everyone with her starting point. Our starting points are always given in advance, for everyone is a bearer of a particular social identity within the tradition she was born into. Every person derives his/her identity from the community to which s/he belongs. The importance of a tradition for one's identity is clear from MacIntyre's claim that "I am born with a past; and to try to cut myself off from that past, in the individualistic mode, is to deform my present relationships" (221). However, it is important to stress that the importance of a moral tradition in one's life does not imply, for MacIntyre, that one is obliged to accept all the moral limitations of one's community. For everyone is involved in a process of transforming these limitations (221).

I have tried in this section to offer an exposition of MacIntyre's *initial* Aristotelian alternative to modernity as elaborated in *After Virtue*. The rationale

---

<sup>18</sup> Larmore reads this formulation (allowing a pluralistic perspective) as MacIntyre's concession to moral pluralism, for one of the features of Aristotle's ethics he has striven to revive was its monistic character (that it is *the* conception of the good life). He explains MacIntyre's inconsistency as his allegiance to modernity, Larmore 1987, 37. However, if one sees the further development of MacIntyre's argument, particularly in his later work (see 1988; 1990; 1990/1998), Larmore's conclusion may be rejected. This is because MacIntyre's argument in his later work is closely tied to a distinctively Aristotelian/Thomist metaphysics which allows him a significantly less pluralistic picture of the good life for man.

<sup>19</sup> For a detailed discussion of MacIntyre's distinctive notion of tradition and the evaluation of its various, e.g. relativistic, implications it is possible to consult my article "MacIntyre on Tradition, Rationality, and Relativism", Kuna 2005.

behind his restatement (described in the first section and supplemented in this one) helps us in understanding its distinctive character. One of its most important features is its anti-metaphysical fashion. In other words the fact that teleology necessary for any version of Aristotelianism is in MacIntyre's restatement fully furnished by a sort of sociology. As this aspect may prove extremely controversial and interesting I will pay attention to it in the context of my examination of MacIntyre's Aristotelianism in the final section of this paper.<sup>20</sup> Even though MacIntyre is probably most frequently associated with his *After Virtue*, it may be important to emphasize that this book itself represents only an initial stage in his formulation of Aristotelianism.<sup>21</sup> For it has been revised, amended, and at points seriously elaborated upon mainly in his following several subsequent books *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, and *Dependent Rational Animals*. Therefore, I will now turn to these moments of MacIntyre's development towards a formulation of the most defensible version of Aristotelian ethics.

### 3. Tradition, Rational Enquiry, and Metaphysics

Some basic contours of MacIntyre's initial Aristotelian alternative to modern ethics were delineated in the previous section. We have seen that he offered "a reformulation of Aristotelian virtue ethics in which participation in a tradition plays a role analogous to that played by Aristotle's metaphysical biology [...]" (Porter 2003, 38). While its general structure and content presents itself as undoubtedly Aristotelian, one of its most striking features is MacIntyre's resort to sociology that was to replace Aristotle's metaphysics. However, MacIntyre gradually mitigated and eventually completely abandoned his original hostility to Aristotle's metaphysical framework for ethics, and so this section is meant to briefly trace and reconstruct this development.

Both *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, the sequels to *After Virtue*, seem to fulfill what was then a not yet completed task of providing a systematic account of the rationality presupposed by its arguments (MacIntyre 1985, 260). MacIntyre indeed provides the reader with this kind of account in these two books and the notion of tradition not only plays a very important role, but increasingly different than before.<sup>22</sup> While

---

<sup>20</sup> The reason why this issue should be examined is the fact that one can see Aristotle as a viable alternative to both modernity and Nietzsche, and still object to MacIntyre's Aristotelian restatement. This seems to be the case with Deborah Achtenberg. I suggest that her illuminating reading of *After Virtue* helps us to understand MacIntyre's internal development in his overall project, Achtenberg 1992.

<sup>21</sup> It is also true that his defense of Aristotelian ethics has after the publication of *After Virtue* taken the form of the defense of the ethics as developed within the Aristotelian/Thomist tradition. What this latter notion means for MacIntyre I explain in my article MacIntyre on Tradition, Rationality, and Relativism, Kuna 2005, 263-266.

<sup>22</sup> It is important to bear in mind, as Jean Porter points out, that of this key notion in MacIntyre's project "he never defines the term [...] nor does he situate his account of tradition in the context of other recent discussions", Porter 2003, 38. This fact, I believe, causes some obstacles to any interpreter of MacIntyre's ethical theory.



in the initial formulation of "tradition" the notion referred mainly to its moral, social and generally cultural dimensions, providing the fundamental background to the life of the individual (his/her ordering of different kinds of practice one is engaged in, as well as providing an ultimate justification for the virtues defined and defended within each particular practice), now it is narrowed down and reserved to something like a tradition of intellectual enquiry (MacIntyre 1988, 349-369; 1990, 82-148).

So this modified and developed version of the notion of tradition takes now the form of the claim that rationality and so also every theoretical enquiry is "tradition-constituted". The idea is well stated when MacIntyre claims that

"there is no other way to engage in the formulation, elaboration, rational justification, and criticism of accounts of practical rationality and justice except from within some one particular tradition in conversation, cooperation, and conflict with those who inhabit the same tradition. There is no standing ground, no place for enquiry, no way to engage in the practices of advancing, evaluating, accepting, and rejecting reasoned argument apart from that which is provided by some particular tradition or other." (MacIntyre 1988, 350)

This radical statement illustrates well MacIntyre's departure from the notion of tradition as mere social and also moral phenomenon towards something conceived of as a methodologically and thematically focused form of rational (theoretical) investigation. Tradition provides everyone engaged in an enquiry of this sort with a framework for his or her reasoning both theoretical and practical. However, it develops gradually over time, because

"[t]he rationality of a tradition-constituted and tradition-constitutive enquiry is in key and essential part a matter of the kind of progress which it makes through a number of well-defined types of stage. Every such form of enquiry begins in and from some conditions of pure historical contingency, from the beliefs, institutions and practices of some particular community which constitute a given." (354)

This means that even though rationality is always and necessarily in its beginnings a matter of mere contingency it may and it often does develop into a highly sophisticated and theoretically complex phenomenon that is best understood as fundamentally dependent upon its historically and communally contingent starting points, even when it reaches a point of a relative independence from its own points of departure. "Tradition" in this form does not cease to provide the notion of virtue with the background against which it is understood, explained, and defended. In other words "what had initially been suggested a moral concept, a part of the necessary framework for developing the idea of virtue, has now been transformed into an epistemic and linguistic concept, which plays a central role in explicating the meaning of truth and rationality" (Porter 2003, 50).

In MacIntyre's two sequels to *After Virtue* it is instructive to notice that as he modifies/develops his notion of tradition into a form of intellectual investigation he also simultaneously shows his increasing sympathy to the classical

metaphysical tradition as best exemplified for him in the philosophy of Aristotle and Aquinas in particular (MacIntyre 1988, 167–182; 1990/1998, 127–148). However, MacIntyre’s most determined acceptance and apology of the Aristotelian/Thomist metaphysics as he puts it most baldly can be found in his 1990 Aquinas Lecture “First Principles, Final Ends, and Contemporary Philosophical Issues” (MacIntyre 1990/1998). It is in the course of the lecture that MacIntyre develops his understanding of the role of first principles (of metaphysics) in the Aristotelian/Thomist tradition of enquiry. He claims their immunity to criticism usually directed against epistemological first principles – this way, it is possible to argue, he secures an important element of this tradition’s metaphysics (MacIntyre 1990/1998, 174–175). MacIntyre also stresses the teleological nature of the Thomist conception of enquiry and so also teleological nature of rationality (181–182). I cannot pursue this question here in greater detail to cover his subtle arguments and challenge to contemporary philosophy from the perspective of the Aristotelian/Thomist *metaphysics*, but I believe it is possible to observe MacIntyre’s increasing confidence in the Aristotelian metaphysical framework, which at a first sight seems to be inconsistent with his original pessimism concerning its viability.

However, it is not just that MacIntyre reduces his reservation to Aristotle’s metaphysics, he revises some of his central objections to it. We have seen that the main target in *After Virtue* was Aristotle’s metaphysical biology, and given this, it seems essential to take into account his recantation and clarification of the objection he put forward in his last major book, *Dependent Rational Animals*, the position he adopted twenty-eight years after the publication of *After Virtue* (MacIntyre 1999).<sup>23</sup> MacIntyre states there explicitly that “although there is indeed good reason to repudiate important elements in Aristotle’s biology, I now judge that I was in error in supposing an ethics independent of biology to be possible” (MacIntyre 1999, x). This is an extremely significant conclusion and it is equally “significant that in this book, the concept of tradition plays almost no role, in contrast to each of his other major works following *After Virtue*” (Porter 2003, 43). At the end of this exposition it seems there are several radical changes to MacIntyre’s ethics. The nature and extent of the change should not be exaggerated, however, for it is also possible to argue that MacIntyre “throughout his career [...] has shown an openness to a robust naturalism in ethics [...]” (Solomon 2003, 114). It is his last major book that seems to heavily support this claim (MacIntyre 1999).

We have seen in this section that MacIntyre’s understanding of what a viable version of Aristotelian ethics is like, has developed over the years. He not only modified his key notion of tradition first developed in *After Virtue* to refer primarily to a social and moral context for moral life into a version of rational enquiry, but his attitude towards a distinctively Aristotelian metaphysics has changed too. Thus from the perspective of late MacIntyre it is not Aristotle’s metaphysical biology that is considered false and in need of rejection if a sound Aristotelian ethics is to be formulated, but only the mistakes of his biology that

---

<sup>23</sup> I refer here to the first edition of *After Virtue* that was published in 1981, even though I work throughout the article with the second edition of the book published in 1985.

must be discarded. These developments must be taken into consideration when the question of the adequacy of his Aristotelian restatement is evaluated, the task to which I now turn.

#### 4. MacIntyre's Aristotelian Ethics and the Ethics of Aristotle

Before a concluding assessment concerning the role of metaphysics in MacIntyre's neo-Aristotelian ethics is suggested two things need to be done. First, as MacIntyre's starting points so his proposed solutions must be put in context. This seems to require consideration his version of virtue ethics against a broader scholarly debate concerning Aristotle's ethical methodology and the viability of Aristotelianism as such. Second, my reconstruction of MacIntyre's restatement in the previous two sections traced the development of an originally anti-metaphysical Aristotelian ethics of *After Virtue* into his acceptance of a full-blown Aristotelian/Thomist ethics in his later works. Thus, MacIntyre's restatement should be interpreted within the context of the overall development of his broader project.

Let me start with the first point. We have seen in the previous section that in *After Virtue* MacIntyre felt a serious unease with Aristotle's metaphysical foundation of his ethics (namely because of the foundation of teleology on a false metaphysical biology). Thus, since he strongly rejected Aristotle's 'metaphysical biology' as false, it is possible to track several important assumptions MacIntyre seems to hold. He believes the following:

1. Aristotle's ethics rests on a false metaphysical biology,
2. his teleology is objectionable on the basis of its grounding in this mistaken metaphysics,
3. the teleology necessary for an Aristotelian ethics can be attained in a non-metaphysical manner.

Is he, however, justified in holding these assumptions? If it is possible to show that he is not, some further consequences may follow. However, before I offer an answer to this question, let me briefly sketch different interpretative approaches towards the foundational question of Aristotle's ethics.

First, there is a scholarly disagreement concerning the question of whether Aristotle based his ethics on his metaphysics. If he *did not*,<sup>24</sup> then the question of viability (or correctness) of his metaphysics becomes irrelevant to the issue in question.<sup>25</sup> If, however, Aristotle *did* in fact base his ethics on his metaphysics, then at least two possible avenues of advocacy of his ethics are available. This is because we may accept the metaphysical foundation of his ethics, but still argue:

---

<sup>24</sup> This is the position advocated by Timothy Roche, Roche 1988.

<sup>25</sup> This is not, of course, to provide the compelling argument for the Aristotelian ethics, but only to make room for such an argument. The next step required consists in showing that Aristotle's ethical methodology is defensible and his substantive ethical claims are justifiable.

*either* that the most problematic parts of Aristotle's metaphysics are not fatal to his ethics<sup>26</sup> *or* that Aristotle's false metaphysical foundation is fatal to his ethics, but can be substituted by some different (namely sociological) account of teleology.<sup>27</sup> Let me say more in detail about each of these positions. They can be put as follows, Aristotle's ethics is

- A. not founded on his metaphysics,
- B. founded on his metaphysics, but:
  1. the essential elements of his metaphysics are not fatal to his ethics,
  2. his false metaphysical biology is fatal to his ethics, but can be substituted by sociological teleology.

The first position (A) is forcefully defended by Timothy Roche. Against Terrence Irwin, he argues that a purely autonomous dialectic is the only method Aristotle uses in his ethics. He questions Irwin's contentions concerning Aristotle's need to appeal outside his ethics to justify his ethical principles, as well as textual evidence supporting the metaphysical foundation hypothesis (Roche 1988, 49). Roche offers textual evidence supporting his claim that Aristotle's doctrine of the autonomy of different branches of philosophical knowledge does apply also to his ethics (Roche 1988, 54). This does not rule out, however, the use of metaphysical propositions in dialectical reasoning in ethics, for such a proposition is authoritative not because it is metaphysical, but because it is one of important and respected beliefs (*endoxa*) (Roche 1988, 55). Then, the most Roche is willing to accept is that Aristotle *can* support his ethical argument by his metaphysics, but denies that he actually *does* (Roche 1988, 59).<sup>28</sup>

The second position (B) in both its forms brings us considerably closer to MacIntyre's own position/s. Now, whereas B.1 is quite optimistic about the degree of the sound core in Aristotle's metaphysics, or at least about its part relevant for his ethics, B.2 does not share this optimism and prefer to save the Aristotelian ethics by a different means than those made available by Aristotle's metaphysics.

Let me begin with the latter position (B.2) first, as it is one espoused by MacIntyre in *After Virtue*. We have seen, in the second section, that MacIntyre was carefully avoiding an appeal to the metaphysical notion of human nature or the metaphysical account of human *telos*. He suggested an alternative to the "false" metaphysical biology, which is related to the narrative aspect of human beings and pervasive social and contextual character of human life. MacIntyre is probably correct in stressing this as a matter of fact, but it is still not entirely

---

<sup>26</sup> This is the position of Deborah Achtenberg (Achtenberg 1992) and late MacIntyre, MacIntyre 1988; 1990; 1990/1998.

<sup>27</sup> Early MacIntyre of *After Virtue*.

<sup>28</sup> Roche argues that Aristotle does not need to appeal outside his ethics in justifying Aristotle's first principles of ethics. And though Roche's argument is well balanced the whole point of argument between him and Irwin seems to be on whether Aristotle *might* or *might not* appeal to some of his metaphysical and psychological views to defend his ethical claims.

clear whether this is the way to avoid (at least implicit<sup>29</sup>) metaphysics. Further, if this is the case, there may arise the question of whether what was lost in his anti-metaphysical enterprise is not in fact of a greater value than what he really gained. This question may prove important, because MacIntyre's inability to provide a non-metaphysical account of teleology<sup>30</sup> (the issue to which I will turn now) seems to suggest the superiority of a distinctively metaphysical reading of Aristotle's arguments in *Ethics*.<sup>31</sup> The arguments for this conclusion are part of position B.1 to which I will turn now.

The B.1 position has been advocated by Deborah Achtenberg (Achtenberg 1992). She argues (and I find her arguments quite compelling) that MacIntyre's three assumptions, listed in the beginning of this section, are all wrong. For Achtenberg argues that Aristotle's ethics does not rest on false metaphysics. Interestingly enough, not only does she claim, against MacIntyre of *After Virtue*, that Aristotle's ethics "does not rest on an erroneous metaphysics [...] [but also that] [...] MacIntyre's proposed alternative to Aristotle's ethics [...] rests on the same metaphysical presuppositions that Aristotle's does" (Achtenberg 1992, 317-318). This means that at least three moments deserve our attention here. First, what are the reasons for MacIntyre's rejection of Aristotle's metaphysically grounded moral theory? Second, given his arguments is MacIntyre fully justified in this rejection? Finally, is MacIntyre's Aristotelian ethics in fact not as metaphysical in its nature as Aristotle's?

MacIntyre's main reasons for his rejection of Aristotle's metaphysical foundational strategy in ethics are as follows. The core of his criticism, as we have already seen, is related to the notion of "metaphysical biology" on which, he argues, Aristotle based his ethics – the decision seen as neither necessary nor fortunate.<sup>32</sup> It was unnecessary, MacIntyre believes, since

"the use of 'man' as a functional concept [so fundamental for any version of Aristotelian ethics, m.k.] is far older than Aristotle and it does not initially derive from Aristotle's metaphysical biology. It is rooted in the forms of social life to which the theorists of the classical tradition give expression [...] [and in which] [...] to be a man is to fill a set of roles each of which has its own point and purpose [...]" (MacIntyre 1985, 58–59).<sup>33</sup>

This move was not fortunate, because it is problematic to assume (as MacIntyre believes Aristotle did) that "human beings, like the members of all other species,

<sup>29</sup>By an "implicit metaphysics" I am going to mean the fact that some (e.g. ethical) position meets the criteria to be justifiably called metaphysical or metaphysically founded either without being aware of it or in spite of proclaiming the opposite.

<sup>30</sup>This is the claim I am going to defend in what follows using the arguments developed by Deborah Achtenberg (see Achtenberg 1992). I will also point to the development of MacIntyre's own position on the issue in question in his later works.

<sup>31</sup>This is so, of course, provided that the A. position is shown inadequate, which is the claim which is not established yet, as it would require a close textual examination of Aristotle's work.

<sup>32</sup>MacIntyre's notion of "metaphysical biology" can be found at several places in *After Virtue* (see MacIntyre 1985, 58, 148, 196).

<sup>33</sup>It is probably the realization of this possibility that helps to understand why and how MacIntyre arrived at a sociological version of teleology.

have a specific nature; and that nature is such that they have certain goals, such that they move by nature towards a specific *telos*” (148). Here MacIntyre’s objection would be something like the claim that “Aristotle’s ethics [...] presupposes aspects of his teleology that have long since been rejected [...] [and to claim that] [...] living beings move by nature to their *telos* [...] is perhaps the most objectionable component of [...] [his] biology” (Achtenberg 1992, 324). However, does Aristotle’s ethics really suffer from these flaws? If not, MacIntyre’s critique of Aristotle would probably lose a lot of its initial plausibility.

To answer the question raised at the end of the previous paragraph it is possible to argue, as Deborah Achtenberg does, by offering a textual support for her claim, that Aristotle did not believe that “human beings move by nature towards a specific *telos*” (325). This is because, *eudaimonia*—a peculiarly human *telos*—is attained via virtuous activity and virtue is not by nature, though neither against it; so she concludes that MacIntyre (in the passage cited in the paragraph above) misrepresented Aristotle’s initial paragraph in *Ethics* on this crucial point (325). For Aristotle did not claim that human beings move by nature to what is good, but rather to what they *believe* is good (326). Saying this Achtenberg does not claim that Aristotle’s ethics is completely unproblematic, she rather claims that “the belief that living beings move by nature towards *telos*. [that is the] [...] most objectionable part of his teleology is irrelevant to his ethics, and thus is no cause for us to want to revise it” (327). Thus, if the argument of this section is correct MacIntyre’s opposition to Aristotle’s metaphysical biology seems to be an expression of misinterpretation and seems to suggest that Aristotle’s ethics is not vulnerable on the grounds of its metaphysical background.

However, Achtenberg does not claim just that Aristotle’s ethics is immune to criticism of this sort, she extends her critique of MacIntyre, claiming that his Aristotelian ethics is in fact as metaphysical as was Aristotle’s or, as she puts it, MacIntyre’s ethics “has every metaphysical commitment that he imputes to Aristotle” (335). How does she justify this startling idea? She points to several moments of MacIntyre’s supposedly non-metaphysical, but allegedly teleological account of ethics. She concentrates on the issue of how human beings make sense of their lives. She notes that the unity to human life is in *After Virtue* provided by a narrative and concludes that it is problematic if meant as an entirely non-metaphysical approach and suggests several reasons why this is the case (336).

First, she reminds us of Aristotle’s understanding of man as a rational animal and claims a substantial interchangeability between the notion of rationality and intentionality. Then, she points to the fact that in MacIntyre’s account human beings are seen primarily as intentional/conversational actors. What unites the accounts of these two thinkers is the notion of “logos” (that again unites the notions of rationality to intentionality and/or conversation). Moreover, MacIntyre’s definition of virtue as an *acquired human quality*, which if possessed and exercised by an individual, allows him/her to achieve those goods that are internal to various complex activities s/he is engaged in. Achtenberg rightly points to the fact that an exercisable quality “is at least a capacity and possibly disposition”, and so this definition is clearly metaphysical as it “requires some account of potentiality and act, that is, of capacities or dispositions and their

exercise" (337). Finally, there is an analogy/agreement between Aristotle and MacIntyre on the issue of human *telos*. "Here MacIntyre and Aristotle follow the same procedure. Each gives human being a specific nature, distinguished by action with *logos*, and then derives their understanding of the human *telos* from it. For Aristotle it is the activity in accordance with ethical or intellectual virtue; for MacIntyre it is a life unified by enacted narrative" (337).

The previous paragraphs have shown, I believe, what reasons led MacIntyre to reject Aristotle's metaphysically founded ethics. I think Achtenberg's argument that his rejection was caused by a misinterpretation of some relevant Aristotle's claims by MacIntyre is quite compelling. However, the argument has not just been that MacIntyre was not justified in that respect, but also that his Aristotelian ethics seems to be in fact as metaphysical as that of Aristotle. This seems to suggest that MacIntyre has not succeeded, despite all his effort, in formulating a non-metaphysical account of ethics with a substantial plausibility.

At this point we can return to MacIntyre's anti-metaphysical assumptions. For, once these two claims are established, they prove the first two<sup>34</sup> of the three assumptions presented at the beginning of this section mistaken. This means that Aristotle's ethics does not rest on a false metaphysical biology, or at least MacIntyre did not prove it does; and Aristotle's teleology is not objectionable on the basis of its grounding in an erroneous metaphysics. The last assumption<sup>35</sup> also seems to be highly contestable. Why?

Taking these two conclusions seriously, MacIntyre's last assumption—the possibility of Aristotelian ethics attained in a non-metaphysical fashion—seems to be extremely vulnerable. The argument here is not that it is impossible to do so. However, given the fact that a leading proponent of the Aristotelian ethics has not been able to do so—against his explicit intentions—seems to be very telling. I think we should ask the question: what conclusions are to be drawn from the falsity of MacIntyre's anti-metaphysical assumptions. Should we conclude that MacIntyre failed to offer an alternative to modern ethics on the one hand, and to Nietzsche's proposal on the other? I do not think so. Why?

I suggest that we should read MacIntyre's claims in the context of his overall project, within which he not only accepted Aristotelian ethics, but also abandoned his own anti-metaphysical claims. I depicted his development towards a robust Aristotelian/Thomist metaphysics in the previous section. Therefore, I think it is possible to formulate two important moments here. First, we have seen that already in *After Virtue* MacIntyre was much less non-metaphysical than he wanted and claimed to be. Second, given the discussion above I suggest that MacIntyre's turn to metaphysics should not be viewed as a radical move, but rather a shift of emphasis, in which the 'implicit' metaphysical basis of his ethics has been made 'explicit'. I believe that this reading not only makes the role of

---

<sup>34</sup> The first of these two assumptions was the claim that Aristotle's ethics rests on a false metaphysical biology, and the second was the claim that Aristotle's teleology is objectionable on the basis of its grounding in this mistaken metaphysics.

<sup>35</sup> The claim that the teleology necessary for an Aristotelian ethics can be attained in a non-metaphysical manner.

metaphysics in MacIntyre's project more intelligible, but it also strengthens his case for an Aristotelian moral theory.<sup>36</sup>

So far so good; it appears that MacIntyre's Aristotelian restatement makes most sense if taken as an expression of the B.1 position. However, this is not the same as to show that this is the position that best preserves what is of constant value in Aristotle's moral philosophy. I think that MacIntyre's own inability to 'walk' unproblematically the non-metaphysical path (the B.2 position) in reviving the Aristotelian ethics seems to suggest that the only possible alternative to B.1 left is something like the A position. In other words, it is possible to ask the question of whether the metaphysical reading of Aristotle's methodology is ultimately more convincing than the one which sees a purely autonomous dialectical method as the only means used by Aristotle to defend his ethical project. Though this is an important question, I cannot pursue it here further. This is because the main concern of this article is not what is the most faithful version of Aristotelian ethics, but rather the question of what MacIntyre considers it to be—and all this from the perspective of the role of metaphysics in MacIntyre's project.

The thrust of this paper was an examination of MacIntyre's restatement of Aristotelian ethics. I went through various developmental stages of his restatement paying a particular attention to MacIntyre's attitude to the question of metaphysical foundation of Aristotle's ethics. After that, I briefly situated his restatement within a broader scholarly debate concerning the nature and method of Aristotle's ethics and evaluated various relevant arguments. We have seen that in his search for a defensible restatement of the Aristotelian ethics MacIntyre changed his initial negative attitude to metaphysics as a basis for ethics within his Aristotelian project. Despite the fact that MacIntyre initially repudiated Aristotle's metaphysical biology it appears that his account has nevertheless always been (implicitly or explicitly) metaphysical.

## Bibliography

- Achtenberg, D. (1992), On the Metaphysical Presuppositions of Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics, in: *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 26, 317–340  
 Horton, J./Mendus, S. (eds.) (1994), *After MacIntyre*, Cambridge  
 Knight, K. (ed.) (1998), *The MacIntyre Reader*, Notre Dame  
 Kotva, J. (1996), *The Christian Case for Virtue Ethics*, Washington/DC  
 Kuna, M. (2005), MacIntyre on Tradition, Rationality, and Relativism, in: *Res Publica. Journal for Social and Legal Philosophy* 11(3), 251–272  
 Larmore, Ch. (1987), *Patterns of Moral Complexity*, Cambridge  
 MacIntyre, A. (1985), *After Virtue*, Notre Dame  
 — (1967/1998), *Short History of Ethics*, London  
 — (1990), *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, Notre Dame

---

<sup>36</sup> There is sometimes the impression that MacIntyre's anti-metaphysical account contradicts his later metaphysical and Thomist position. It is possible to claim that MacIntyre is in *After Virtue* committed to an implicit metaphysics. This interpretation fits also Knight's view that "while MacIntyre's ideas have changed considerably over the years, his central concerns have remained the same" (Knight 1998, 1).



- (1988), *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, Notre Dame
- (1990/1998), *First Principles, Final Ends and Contemporary Philosophical Issues*, in: Knight, K. (ed.), *The MacIntyre Reader*, Notre Dame, 171–201
- Porter, J. (2003), *Tradition in the Recent Work of Alasdair MacIntyre*, in: Murphy, M. C. (ed.) *Alasdair MacIntyre*, Cambridge, 38–69
- Roche, T. (1988), *On the Alleged Metaphysical Foundation of Aristotle's Ethics*, in: *Ancient Philosophy* 8, 49–62
- Smreková, D./Palovičová, Z. (2003), *Dobro a cnosť. Etická tradícia a súčasnosť*, Bratislava
- Solomon, D. (2003), *MacIntyre and Contemporary Moral Philosophy*, in: Murphy, M. C. (ed.), *Alasdair MacIntyre*, Cambridge, 114–151
- (1995), *Normative Ethical Theories*, in: Reich, W. T. (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Bioethics*, New York, 736–747