A deontological interpretation of MacIntyre's teleological theory

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Abstract

Alasdair MacIntyre's Aristotelianism aims at the good of the agent, and is considered to give priority to the good over the right. Hence, this account of morality is taken as contrary to act-based deontology. In this paper, however, it is argued that MacIntyre's distinction between the internal and external goods of practices places him close to deontology. This is because the rejected notion of happiness in Kant's deontology fits MacIntyre's notion of external goods, which, according to him, should not be our moral concern. If we accept practices as adequate contexts for the definition of some virtues such as justice, the resultant account of morality would approach a deontological one in the sense that the right is independent of its consequences. In this paper, MacIntyre's Aristotelian distinction between internal and external goods are explained, and it is argued that the internal good of practices is conceptually close to deontological ethics.

Keywords: deontology, teleology, Aristotle, Kant, MacIntyre

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1. Introduction

Alasdair MacIntyre is an advocate of Aristotelian teleological morality according to which the achievement of the good is the measure of morality. Moral actions are actions that aim at the good of the agent. In this view, the good has priority over the right; and we should know what the good is and what its requirements are in order to formulate the rules of the right action (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 52). If the good has priority over the right, it follows that moral actions are actions that are performed by good characters for good intentions and good reasons. This account of morality is taken by some moral philosophers as contrary to act-based deontology, which in their views, underlies the priority of the right and its independence of the good.

The aim of the paper is to argue that MacIntyre's moral theory, despite his criticisms of deontology, is not so much different from the latter, particularly if deontology allows some amendments to itself to become distinct from moral absolutism. It would be a mistake to locate MacIntyre's teleology under consequentialism on basis of the assumption that it is centred on the notion of *telos* as states of affairs, which distinguishes consequentialism from deontology.

2. Deontology

The term deontology is derived from the Greek origin *deon* meaning what is binding, or duty. Jeremy Bentham defines the term deontology, based on its Greek origin, as "the knowledge of what is right or proper". However, in Bentham's view, the individual's well-being is connected with the well-being of others "by the hands of nature" (2005, p. 23). This means that for Bentham, deontology is associated with the fulfilment of individual and social interests. However, by the modern standard understanding of deontology, this harmony is not necessarily held, and deontological rightness is thought to be a property of acts, irrespective of their consequences.

As is the case in Kant's deontology, the universal conceptual consistency of an act, and not its factual consequences, is the measure of its permissibility. For instance, it is not conceptually possible to lie, because lying itself depends on the value of truth telling. In other words, even when people lie, they disguise their lies as truths; thus, if there is no trust in truths, the very practice of lying becomes impossible. The universalizability test—act as if the maxim of your action were to become by your will a universal law of

nature (Kant, 1997, p. 31)—is about the feature of an act, and does not concern its consequences.

Morality, in this view, is a matter of abiding by universal rational principles. The principles of right action, including the principles of justice, are the products of practical reasoning, which can operate independently of the contingent contexts. Practical reasoning is a capacity in moral rational agents that can autonomously originate the principles of right action without deriving them from other principles such as the principles of the good or from states of affairs or consequences, and this is what is meant by deontology. In sum, we should practice our moral duties regardless of the consequences that bear upon them.

Some advocates of virtue-ethics criticise Kant's deontology on the grounds that it does not take account of the virtues and agents' characters, and is almost exclusively a rule-based morality. As MacIntyre (1981, p. 236) puts it:

> In Kant's moral writings by contrast [to Aristotelian or Christian teleology] we have reached a point at which the notion that morality is anything other than obedience to rules has almost, if not quite, disappeared from sight. And so the central problems of moral philosophy come to cluster around the question 'How do we know *which* rules to follow?'

As another example, Philippa Foot (1978, p. 1) places Kant in the group of moral philosophers who have neglected the role of the virtues in their studies of ethics:

> For many years the subject of the virtues and vices was strangely neglected by moralists working within the school of analytic philosophy. The tacitly accepted opinion was that a study of the topic would form no part of the fundamental work of ethics.

In the same vein, Bernard Williams (1981, p. 19) states that the Kantian moral method, which is based on treating people in abstraction from their character, is a misrepresentation of thought, because "it leaves out what both limits and helps to define that aspect of thought." What is common in this kind of virtue-ethics-originated criticisms of Kant is the thought that deontology—including its Kantian version—consists only of outward conformity to moral rules without taking into account the reasons or intentions that are behind this conformity.

On the contrary, in MacIntyre's teleological ethics, practical reasoning, as will be explained later, is not a capacity of autonomous individuals; ra-

ther, it is a part of the identity of the self constituted in various traditions and in relation to other fellow members in a social practice or tradition. Universal patterns for the operation of practical rationality are not substantially enough to guide moral agents in all particular situations. Acting rightly, though in most cases consists of acting in accordance with moral principles, has some aspects that are not captured by these principles. Practical intelligence and discernment are not exhausted by moral principles; rather, agents need to have practical training and virtuous character to possess them.

3. Discussion

Deontology is commonly contrasted with consequentialism, which includes various brands of utilitarianism and teleological approaches. Deontology concerns rightness that is a property of acts, and consequentialism concerns goodness that is a property of states of affairs or outcomes (Broome, 1991, p. 3).

In this study, it is claimed that MacIntyre's moral theory does not take us much further than deontology, which is in fact a claim against placing teleological approaches under consequentialism. All teleological approaches encourage promoting some particular kinds of *telos* or good. In one sense, they concern ends and the good as the consequences of our actions and the measures of right actions. If this is the case, why cannot we consider teleology as the subset of consequentialism?

In response to this question, I appeal to the internal/external goods dichotomy introduced by MacIntyre. Internal goods are the main aims of practices and are uncompetitive, in the sense that others' attainment of these goods does not reduce my share of them. Internal goods are not states of affairs to be produced in practices; rather, they are standards of excellence in agents. When proponents of deontological ethics reject consequences as the measure of right actions, they have in mind states of affairs such as happiness, utility, wealth, etc. These goods are competitive and external, in the sense that the more one acquire them the less remains for others. The way MacIntyre situates practices within the narrative life and tradition leans him toward deontology. Let me now explain further what MacIntyre thinks by practice, internal and external goods.

4. The Process of Practice–Narrative–Tradition in the Definition of the Virtues

By practice MacIntyre means "any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized" (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 187). Based on this definition, football is a practice but throwing a ball is not. Football is a socially established activity, but throwing a ball is an individual act with uncertain meaning and intentions. The game of chess is a practice with socially recognized rules, which maintain the games' genuine aims, that is, a fair entertainment.

According to this definition, MacIntyre identifies two related concepts: 1) standards of excellence and rules, and 2) the achievement of internal goods. Practice for MacIntyre is constituted by the achievement of some internal good(s), which, in turn, determines some criteria as the standards of excellence. Internal goods are the main aims of practices. The characteristic of these goods is that "their achievement is a good for the whole community who participate in the practice"; by contrast, the characteristic of external goods is that the more someone has of them, the less remains for others (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 190). Consider, for instance, the game of chess as a practice whose main end is to accrue our mental power, or simply to enjoy entertainment.

There is an internal good, here strategic thinking, that constitutes the game of chess. This concept is used to define the game's rules. Ideally, it classifies actions that occur within the practice as right or wrong, allowed or disallowed. The achievement of this internal good is the main criterion for right actions in the game; and virtues are the human traits that direct the participants in practices toward achieving the internal goods. MacIntyre (1981, p. 191) defines a virtue at this stage as "an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods." This definition, MacIntyre asserts, is a tentative one and needs to be completed later.

There are also some external or peripheral goods to practices, such as wealth, fame, and pride, which are nonetheless necessary for running the practices; but if these external goods replace the internal good or supersede it, the whole character of the practice would degenerate fundamentally. For instance, suppose that the dominant goal of a chess player is to achieve fame; in this case, he can rig the game, if he is sure that the fraud will not be

detected, without missing the good he has in mind; though the main aim of the game is lost here. A better example is the invention of "nursery cannons" in billiards, as a measure within the game's rules, which ruins the cooperative nature of the game for the sake of wining.

Therefore, it is possible that practices deviate from their main internal good(s). This might be because of humans' motivations, self-interest or the gradual neglect of internal goods over the course of time. Accordingly, practices, in order to sustain, require some traits and characteristics in their participants. These traits, or virtues in MacIntyre's terms, prevent the participants from considering the practices as mere devices to achieve their external goods. As he puts it:

We have to accept as necessary components of any practice with internal goods and standards of excellence the virtues of justice, courage and honesty. For not to accept these, to be willing to cheat as our imagined child was willing to cheat in his or her early days at chess, so far bars us from achieving the standards of excellence or the goods internal to the practice that it renders the practice pointless except as a device for achieving external goods (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 191).

The common aspect of all these characteristics—justice, courage and honesty—which leads MacIntyre to describe them as "genuine virtues" is that they subordinate the participants' behaviour in the practice to its internal good(s); all require people to appeal to some impersonal criteria in their relationships and judgements (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 192). In other words, the virtues serve as objective criteria to subordinate individual desires, and to direct them toward the good of practices. Among the virtues that fulfil this function are the virtues of justice, truthfulness and courage. Without these virtues, "practices cannot be sustained", because individual self-interest will govern and degenerate practices which are based on some objective measures to realize their internal goods (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 192).

So far, the notion of practice and its role in defining virtues and vices is explained. MacIntyre maintains that this notion of practice should be situated in the wider context of narrative, that is, a whole life and tradition. This places MacIntyre's moral theory close to deontology. MacIntyre has taken three strategies to justify this necessary merge of practices as follows.

1) MacIntyre (1981, p. 191) states that his account of the virtues in terms of practices could only be a partial and provisional account, which needs to be complemented to preclude arbitrariness in practices. In his view, if different and incompatible practices are not placed in a broader context, which

is a unified human life, individuals will find themselves oscillating arbitrarily between practices; therefore, it may seem that practices finally derive their authority from subjective individual decisions. The claims of different practices might clash with each other, putting the agent in a tragic conflict—a position in which the agent cannot understand or exercise different goods consistently. Defining the virtues in terms of the internal goods of practices does not suffice to prevent the clashes between the virtues of different practices. For instance, a chess player seeing a child drowning nearby him, faces a clash between the practice of chess, and the practice of saving the child. Here the chess player needs to rank the two practices in order to remove the clash, which needs the wider context of the human good. As a better example, suppose the chess player is threatened to death if he wins the game. In this case, he will compare the good of winning to the good of saving his own life. This comparison requires a context wider than that of either practice.

MacIntyre maintains that Aristotle by putting the virtues in the context of a whole human life was able to predicate them as good, and to disallow of moral tragic conflicts (1981, p. 201); "both Plato and Aristotle treat conflict as an evil and Aristotle treats it as an eliminable evil" (1981, p.157). The elimination of conflicts for Aristotle occurs by locating them in a unified picture of human life with a final good, which can adjudicate among conflicting goods.

2) The second strategy is that the virtues such as justice and patience presuppose a hierarchical order of goods. Justice in an Aristotelian scheme is defined as giving each person his due or desert; so MacIntyre (1981, p. 202) holds that "goods internal to practices need to be ordered and evaluated in some way if we are to assess relative deserts."

There are two possible ways of understanding MacIntyre's claim. The first is that some practices might have more than one internal good, so the assessment of individuals' deserts entails having a hierarchical order of the goods in order to evaluate what is truly their due. The second is that there are different practices with different internal goods the assessment of which needs to be based on a hierarchical order of these goods.

3) The third way MacIntyre attempts to articulate practices into the narrative of human life is by appeal to the virtue of constancy or integrity, which is the virtue that, in his view, cannot be specified at all except with reference to the wholeness of a human life—the virtue of integrity or constancy (1981, p. 203). In other words, the notion of the singleness of pur-

pose as a basis for this virtue is only applicable in the context of a unified human life. Accordingly, MacIntyre (1981, p. 203) concludes that, unless there is a concept of a final telos that transcends the limited goods of practices, it will be both the case that (1) a certain subversive arbitrariness will invade a person's moral life and (2) we shall be unable to specify the context of certain virtues adequately. The word that MacIntyre uses to describe the unity of human life is 'narrative', derived from narration, which means telling a story. A story enjoys integrity with respect to its subject, such that its different episodes are connected to each other to convey a unified picture of the subject, the same MacIntyre suggests for a human life (MacIntyre, 1981, pp. 218–219).

MacIntyre so far has finished the second stage of the process of defining the virtues. Up to this point, he has located the virtues in the context of a good life for man, elevating it from the context of practices; thus he defines virtue as follows:

> Those dispositions which will not only sustain practices and enable us to achieve the goods internal to practices, but which will also sustain us in the relevant kind of quest for the good, by enabling us to overcome the harms, dangers, temptation and distractions which we encounter and which will furnish us with increasing self-knowledge and increasing knowledge of the good (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 219).

MacIntyre continues to place the virtues in the wider context of a moral tradition. He argues that to enter into a practice, "is to enter into a relationship with others not only with its contemporary practitioners, but also with those who preceded us in the practice, particularly those whose achievements extended the reach of the practice to its present point" (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 194). If we suppose that every person from the past to the present point has a unified life, that is a narrative, we admit that they have social and historical identities, and that their narratives are intertwined; "the narrative of any one life is part of an interlocking set of narratives" (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 218). These interlocked narratives make a tradition, which MacIntyre defines as follows, "A living tradition then is a historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition" (1981, p. 222).

As we have seen so far, MacIntyre has offered a three-phase definition of genuine virtues; that is, practice–narrative–moral tradition. He holds that a trait needs to meet all the three phases to be qualified as a virtue, "no hu-

man quality is to be accounted a virtue unless it satisfies the conditions specified at each of the three stages" (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 275). In the next section, I will explain why this account comes close to deontological ethics.

5. Comparing MacIntyre's account of ethics to Deontology

In this section, I will explain how MacIntyre's distinction between internal and external goods draws him close to the Kantian deontology. The explanation is that though Kant's denies the doctrine of happiness can be the basis of morality, his notion of happiness fits MacIntyre's notion of external goods rather than internal goods. The type of happiness that cannot function as the basis of morality for Kant is happiness in terms of the satisfaction of desires and inclinations, which is different from seeking excellence in practices, narratives and traditions.

I quoted MacIntyre (1981, p. 190) that internal goods of practices are not limited and competitive, and their possession by some does not deprive others of them. All participants in practices, whether win external goods or not, achieve internal goods if they observe the rules of practices. Although the loser in the game of chess misses the prize or fame, he attains the main goal of the game including fair entertainment or the enhancement of their intellectual faculty. Furthermore, neither Aristotle nor MacIntyre does define the human being's good in terms of satisfaction of desires; rather, for them the good consists in subjecting desires to the requirements of the virtues (MacIntyre, 1988, p. 112).

The notion of happiness that is rejected by Kant as the principle of morality points to psychological happiness resulting from the satisfaction of desires. This kind of happiness is clearly distinct form Aristotle's and MacIntyre's notion of the human good, resulting from the subjection of the desires to the internal goods of practices. Kant points to this distinction as follows:

making someone happy is quite different from making him good, or making him prudent and sharp-sighted for his own advantage is quite different from making him virtuous; it is the most objectionable because it bases morality on incentives that undermine it and destroy all its sublimity, since they put motives to virtue and those to vice in one class and only teach us to calculate better (Kant, 1996, p. 90).

Though Kant renounces the notion of happiness in the sense of satisfaction of desires, he admits that a kind of happiness as self-contentment might arise from moral agents' observance of their duties: "When a thoughtful

human being has overcome incentives to vice and is aware of having done his often bitter duty, he finds himself in a state that could well be called happiness, a state of contentment and peace of soul in which virtue is its own reward" (Kant, 1996, pp. 510-511).

Therefore, Kant's view about the place of notion of happiness in morality does not negate MacIntyre's eudemonistic view, because Kant is not opposed to happiness as the measure of morality. The only condition is that happiness should not be defined in terms of external goods such as desire satisfaction. The contentment and peace of soul that Kant alludes to parallels MacIntyre's notion of internal goods, which subordinate human desires to the measures of excellence. As Allan W. Wood (2001, p. 279) states:

It is not pursuing happiness as such that contradicts the standpoint of morality, but only the principle of pursuing one's own happiness unconditionally, irrespective of the demands made on us by our own autonomy and the dignity of others… Morality aims not at maximizing human happiness but constraining people to forgo enough of their happiness that their various ends, originally antagonistic to one another, can be brought into harmony under the laws of a realm of ends.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, it is argued that MacIntyre's distinction between the internal and external goods of practices places his views close to deontology, because the rejected notion of happiness in Kant's deontology fits MacIntyre's notion of external goods, which should not constitute one's moral concerns. If we accept practices as contexts for the definition of virtues such as justice, the resultant account of morality would be close to a deontological one in the sense that the right has moral weight independent of its consequences. Moral consequences that should be morally irrelevant according to deontology match MacIntyre's notion of external goods of practices, which supervene on actions and practices. In other words, the consequences of moral actions are external goods in MacIntyre's jargon, and he, like deontologists, insists that they should not be the main considerations in moral actions.

The example of chess is illuminating. From a Kantian deontological perspective, the players should abide by the rules of the game based on the categorical value of truth telling and promise keeping. The consequences of the game, such as losing or winning, are morally irrelevant. From MacIntyre's teleological perspective, also, the players should act fairly and respect the

rules in order to achieve the internal goods of the game, which include the increase in thinking ability and the sense of competitive-cooperative engagement. The players, in this teleological sense, have a moral duty to disregard the external consequences that result from their actions. What will happen later to him if he loses the game, and what consequences will result from that should be morally irrelevant? What should morally matter to him is a fair participation in the game to achieve the internal goods, which is not dependant on winning the game; rather, they depend on a fair and just participation in the game. Accordingly, the player from the two perspectives of deontology and teleology would be advised to take the same course of actions, which is a truthful and honest participation in the game. In other words, although happiness in terms of the internal goods of practices is a state of affairs, it is not what deontology meant by the state of affairs, dismissing it as the measure for determining right actions. This is because the internal goods can act as measures for controlling our desires based on the principles of justice and fairness.

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