The « Secularization » of Ethics. Questioning the Modern Virtues

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The issue, which is at stake here, consists in analysing the modern view of ethics in the context of the social and cultural transformation of the status of the individual. The role of ethics in the history of the modern mind is strictly related to the struggle between liberal individualism and the generic idea of "man," presented as a social actor in a large political and ideological arena. As a matter of fact, beginning with Illuminism, the radical assumption concerning the "human rights" has severed two different directions of thought: 1) The theory of human rights, which are immediately and unconditionally related to the preservation of both negative and positive rights of the individual; 2) the Hegelian and Post-Hegelian view (especially Marxism) – the social and political liberty of the individual is protected only by the direct intervention of the State. Thus, introducing the traditional concept of "virtue" – following Alasdair MacIntyre's theory on traditional virtues – into the arena of the modern ethics debate is seen at first as an adventurous task, but finally, as a possible solution – the neo-Aristotelian view of virtues could be considered as a positive response to the more increasing crisis of traditional values in our society.

Our starting point in the debate concerning ethics as a fundamental human project of instituting and deliberating upon values could begin with the basic assumption that, during the Modern Age, ethics is based upon the new idea of man's freedom of will. Starting with Kant, especially, the modern moral theory placed the individual in a cardinal rational position regarding its desires and aims:

« For reason recognizes the establishment of a good will as its highest practical destination, and in attaining this purpose is capable only of a satisfaction of its own proper kind, namely that from the attainment of an end, which end again is determined by reason only, notwithstanding that this may involve many a disappointment to the ends of inclination. We have then to develop the notion of a will which deserves to be highly esteemed for itself and is good without a view to

KEY WORDS:

ethics, secularization, Nietzsche, human rights, virtue, individualism

anything further, a notion which exists already in the sound natural understanding, requiring rather to be cleared up than to be taught, and which in estimating the value of our actions always takes the first place and constitutes the condition of all the rest. In order to do this, we will take the notion of duty, which includes that of a good will, although implying certain subjective restrictions and hindrances. »[1]

Kant understood that the will, in order to be moral, must necessarily rely on "free" rationality. As he himself declares,

« The will is a kind of causality belonging to living beings in so far as they are rational, and freedom would be this property of such causality that it can be efficient, independently of foreign causes determining it; just as physical necessity is the property that the causality of all irrational beings has of being determined to activity by the influence of foreign causes. »[2]

Now the question that arrises here is in what terms can we define the role of the individual will in respect to the basic rules or laws of morality, which, as we know, can be applicable only if they are universally related to a common moral sense, or, as Kant puts it, to a universality of moral laws. Kant was very aware of the gap between pure individual morality and the establishment of a moral doctrine based on common sense. Thus, he filled this gap by presupposing freedom of the will and rationality as a hypothetical *datum* in his theory; therefore he was not forced to suppress one of the two faces of morality: the subjective or the objective aspect – he simply declared that moral laws are universal as long as they are respected by all human beings, which are, necessarily, endowed with reason, and thus with the free rational recognizing of the correctness of the moral law:

« It is not enough to predicate freedom of our own will, from whatever reason, if we have not sufficient grounds for predicating the same of all rational beings. For as morality serves as a law for us only because we are rational beings, it must also hold for all rational beings; and as it must be deduced simply from the property of freedom, it must be shown that freedom also is a property of all rational beings. It is not enough, then, to prove it from certain supposed experiences of human nature (which indeed is quite impossible, and can only be shown a priori), but we must show that it belongs to the activity of all rational beings endowed with a will. Now I say every being that cannot act except under the idea of freedom is just for that reason in a practical point of view really free, that is to say, all laws which are inseparably connected with freedom have the same force for him as if his will had been shown to be free in itself by a proof theoretically conclusive. »[3]

Nevertheless, the questions still arise, since Kant never succeeded in completely explaining

the relation between subjective and objective reason. The result of this is that modern ethics is deeply concerned with the arbitrariness of individual morality. Hegel, for example, tried to solve this tension by bringing forward the "solid" relationship between the will of the individual and the will of the State. According to Hegel's view, the State, as a rational, objective image of liberty, is the only legitimate custodian of man's moral and legal behaviour. Actually, the individual cannot be acquainted with its own moral and rational limits in the social sphere – the only authorized authority which can establish universal law on morality and liberty is the objective authority of the State, by mediating individual desires and aims.

This aspect is differently but similarly reflected in the classical Marxist theory of the State. Since the State is *not* the "political Idea" *par excellence*[4], for this very reason, says the early Marx, criticizing Hegel's thesis, State is the real materialization of social relations. The relationship between State and society is dialectical: not rigid and ideally petrified, but dynamic, historical, and sometimes even revolutionary. Nevertheless, Marx's materialism does not change the ambiguous shape of the ethical question. Rather, it aggravates it. Thus, the status of the individual becomes more incongruous in a society severed in classes – in this game of social relationships, the individual (as a human being) becomes a mere abstraction or a faded image of the past. The status of man is at stake, because he remains in question only by a theoretical trick: as an ensemble of social relations, even in his most personal spheres:

« The human essence is not an abstraction inherent to the isolated individual. In reality, it is the ensemble of the social relationships. »[5]

Lucien Sève, one of the most renowned theorists of Marxism, recognized that so-called "pure" Marxism was never fond of reflecting upon the idea of humanity or upon the individual as such. He observes the "disqualification" of the concept of individual in the case of classical Marxism, because speaking of "man" in general or as a singular person was considered a real mystification. The history of humanity would therefore appear as a natural process of the development of humanity, but of humanity produced inside and by social relationships:

« Non pas bien sûr que le marxisme « oublie » l'existence et le rôle des hommes « réels », « concrets ». Mais « ne pas oublier » les hommes réels n'implique pas du tout nécessairement qu'on accepte *le concept d'homme* comme conept scientifique – pas plus que l'économiste n'oulie la misère réelle parce qu'il considère qu'en parlantdes « pauvres » on ne possède pas encore un concept scientifique. Or s'il est vrai, comme l'énonce la VI [e] *Thèse sur Feuerbach*, que ce n'est pas dans l'individu que

réside l' « essence » humaine mais dans l'ensemble des rapports sociaux, une science qui croit pouvoir prendre pour objet les individus humains semble bien être une science sans essence, une *fausse science*. On soutiendra donc que les individus ne peuvent intervenir dans la théorie marxiste *que dans la mesure où ils personnifient des rapports sociaux*, donc dans la mesure où ils *ne sont pas* des sujets psychologiques. C'est ce que dit Marx, apparement, dans la Préface de la première édition du *Capital* : *„Il ne s'agit ici des presonnes qu'autant qu'elles sont la personnification des catégories économiques, les supports d'intérêts et de rapports de classe déterminés.* " »[6]

The history of human relationships, as seen in the case of Marxism, does not change the ambiguous status of human ethics in the Modern and Postmodern Age. The point is – and this also clarifies the title of our article – that conceptualizing ethics as being « *secularized* », thus being deprived from the presence of a « transcendent » argument about the *essence of a human being*[7] – entails a set of contradictions which neither Kant nor Hegel were able to solve. Therefore I propose an opinion based upon the famous work of Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*[8], which, right in the heart of the American analytical debate, proposes a surprisingly traditional « ethical turn » to Aristotle's theory of virtue.

Following the modern line of thought, MacIntyre is very much indebted to Hegel's and Marx's view. In fact, his intellectual career is closely related to Marxism[9]: he was at first an active member of the *English New Left*, the British Marxist wing. After he emigrated from Britain to the United States, he rejected Marxism and started to plan his own ethical theory, which is represented in *After Virtue*. Thus, his doctrine is well aware of the contradictions in Hegel's theory:

« In politics, the Hegelian position was attacked by revolutionary communism, while Kierkegaard opened a second front in philosophy, and blamed Hegel for reducing existence to a concept. Under siege on one side by Marxism and the other by Existentialism, the Hegelian synthesis split up. The point of view of the individual and the point of view of society, which Hegel had reconciled, were again separated. Moral philosophy by degrees enshrined an ever more absolute idea of liberty, while the social sciences came to propound a more and more inexorable determinism: on the one hand, man was presented as a subject, and on the other hand as an object. But the desire for unity which the Hegelian system had tried to satisfy remained. »[10]

He also shows skepticism towards Sarte's Marxist humanism or to the morality of the working class:

« In the dispensation of the New Left, one could not reduce morality to something simply relative to class, nor should individual conscience be sacrificed to ideology. Philosophically speaking, this critique is grounded in an analysis of the relation of the agent and the social structure, an analysis prominent in the work of both MacIntyre and Thompson. This revisionist Marxism, which calls itself *humanist socialism*, inserted itself into the existentialist climate of the time. »[11]

Discussing the faith of the ethical thinking in the late XX-th century, MacIntyre is very fond of the idea that neither Marxism nor liberalism could solve the ethical contradiction between objective, ideological reason and subjective, arbitrary will. In fact, he describes individualism in ethics as "emotivism": there are only personal criteria of valuing; all moral judgments are only expressions of preferences and attitudes, as long as these possess a moral or evaluative function. Emotivism could be related to a non-rational explanation of moral habits, thus making impossible a strict differentiation between manipulative and non-manipulative relationships. As MacIntyre explains, postmodern ethics could only be explained by a theory of manipulative relationships between the dominant class (bureaucracy) and the rest of society. This is, of course, a Marxist critical point of view, but clearly depicts *the moral types* typical of our society. MacIntyre recognizes four major types of moral actors, typical of the postmodern period: *the aesthete*, *the therapist*, *the manager*, *and the bureaucratic expert*. Although not obviously, the manager and the bureaucrat are real moral types, as they establish manipulative power, dissimulating the so-called *moral neutrality* of the expert. The economic concept of *efficiency* is therefore *not* morally neutral, but highly active, contributing to the generation of *manipulative* behaviors. Actually, the concept of *efficiency* is in itself a moral concept, although not a real, but rather a *fictional moral concept*, due to the fact that it establishes persuasion through the conviction that the managerial projects are highly specializes and effective and, thus, highly certified. The solid status of the bureaucratic power is thus determined by a *general illusion* that the managerial economic theories are infallible. MacIntyre destroys the myth, saying that the infallibility is only a moral illusion and not a real certified fact: the capitalist society dissimulates efficiency and perfection using a skilled system of ethical, rather then informational or economic, manipulation. Facing the contradictions of the pluralist, individual ethics, MacIntyre adopts a different view: he reestablishes the authority of the Aristotelian tradition of the combined *rational and factual system* of goods. In this case, the role of *moral virtue* is fundamental: virtue is the *actualization of the moral rational interest* (the virtu-

ous person is determined only by its virtuous *facts*), thus being the only way of certifying the moral value:

« In the Homeric poems a virtue is a quality the manifestation of which enables someone to do exactly what their well-defined social role requires. The primary role is that of the warrior king and that Homer lists those virtues which he does becomes intelligible at once when we recognize that the key virtues therefore must be those which enable a man to excel in combat and in the games. It follows that we cannot identify the Homeric virtues until we have first identified the key social roles in Homeric society and the requirements of each of them. The concept of *what anyone filling such-and such a role ought to do* is prior to the concept of a virtue; the latter concept has application only via the former. On Aristotle's account matters are very different. Even though some virtues are available only to certain types of people, nonetheless virtues attach not to men as inhabiting social roles, but to man as such. It is the *telos* of man as a species, which determines what human qualities are virtues. We need to remember however that although Aristotle treats the acquisition and exercise of the virtues as means to an end, the relationship of means to end is internal and not external. I call a means internal to a given end when the end cannot be adequately characterized independently of a characterization of the means. So it is with the virtues and the *telos*, which is the good life for man on Aristotle's account. The *exercise* of the virtues is itself a crucial component of the good life for man. This distinction between internal and external means to an end is not drawn by Aristotle himself in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, as mentioned earlier, but it is an essential distinction to be drawn if we are to understand what Aristotle intended. The distinction *is* drawn explicitly by Aquinas in the course of his defense of St. Augustine's definition of a virtue, and it is clear that Aquinas understood that in drawing it he was maintaining an Aristotelian point of view. The New Testament's account of the virtues, even though it differs considerably in content from Aristotle's—Aristotle would certainly not have admired Jesus Christ and he would have been horrified by St. Paul—does have the same logical and conceptual structure as Aristotle's account. A virtue is, as with Aristotle, a quality the exercise of which leads to the achievement of the human *telos*. *The* good for man is of course a supernatural and not simply a natural good, but supernature redeems and completes nature. Moreover the relationship of virtues as means to the end which is human incorporation in the divine kingdom of the age to come is internal and not external, just as it is in Aristotle. It is, of course, this parallelism which allows Aquinas to synthesize Aristotle and the New Testament. A

key feature of this parallelism is the way in which the concept of *the good life for man* is prior to the concept of a virtue in just the way in which, on the Homeric account, the concept of a social role was prior. Once again, it is the way in which the former concept is applied which determines how the latter is to be applied. In both cases the concept of a virtue is a secondary concept. »[12]

MacIntyre therefore launches a revolutionary theory on the *narrative unity* of the moral life, by reconstructing the three Aristotelian stages of virtue: 1. Individual practice of virtue; 2. Good life; 3. The necessary role of the *community*, which ultimately recognizes the *intrinsic* worth of the individual's actions. His ethical view is the redefinition of the *teleological* view of the moral action, which thus becomes a virtue. Nevertheless there are some questionable issues here. The most stringent is the fact that MacIntyre totally ignores the radical *aristocratic* view on *arête* (virtue), which is clearly exemplified by Aristotle's *Politics*. We know that he rejects every kind of aristocratic individualism, especially Nietzsche's *Übermensch*. But, as Alexander Nehamas explains in his discussion of the relevance of the Greek concept of *arête* in Nietzsche's image of the "noble man", this is the real signification that could be given to the sphere of this concept:

« In ancient Greek thought, there was universal agreement that what distinguishes human beings from one another is the quality called *arête*. Although we usually translate that word as "virtue", that fact that animals as well as inanimate objects exhibit it shows that a better rendering would be, precisely, "distinction", the quality that makes someone an outstanding member of some group. *Arête* is what makes anything justifiably notable. »[13]

Therefore, using the concept of *arête* to explain the moral virtues is a task that is unconditionally related to the concept of the aristocratic "noble man". Any attempt to acclimatize *virtue* to the popular "common sense" of democratic modernity will face serious problems:

« Nobility of soul and nobility of actions cannot therefore be separated from one another. Though it is very difficult to say what that is, noble actions must be of a certain kind: they are contrary to those that betray, as we have seen, its lack and they must be importantly different from the actions that are common in one's world. The individual, who constitutes "greater, more manifold, more comprehensive life transcends and lives beyond the old morality" (*Beyond Good and Evil* 262): that is part of what it is to 'give laws to oneself," to create one's own values, which for Nietzsche is the hallmark of greatness. One is only an individual to the extent that one (to revert to the Greek notions with which we began) is different, stands out, is distinguished from the rest of one's world, from the crowd

which Nietzsche contemptuously dismisses as "the herd." »[14]

Finally, we may ask if Alasdair MacIntyre's attempt to establish a new common sense of virtue as a solution for filling the gap between *actualized value* and *abstract value* is indeed a correct understanding of the traditional concept of virtue. Nevertheless, the debate remains opened:

« MacIntyre does not bother to evaluate the merits claimed by liberal democracy, because it gladly admits its indifference towards virtue, and takes itself for the least worst of regimes. Like Aristotle, MacIntyre refuses to denigrate humanity, but he neglects the attempts of the Philosopher to caution us. By drawing a political philosophy from the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he yokes together the moral ambition of the ancients with the political ambition of the moderns. He uses Aristotle, more than he learns from him. Under cover of this "revolutionary Aristotelianism", one will not find it difficult to find the Marxist Christianity which the young MacIntyre claimed to follow - Thomism making the transition between the Christian ethics to that of the Stagirite. "If the Christian hope is to be realized in history, it must assume the form of a political hope [...]. Marxism is in essence a complete realization of Christian eschatology"– (*Marxism: an Interpretation*, 1953, p. 120). By ignoring the *Politics*, MacIntyre loses the idea of politics as architectonic, and replaces it unwittingly by the Marxist claim that "everything is political". Depoliticization paradoxically implies an overpoliticization: Marx wanted revolution only in order to end politics. MacIntyre associates Aristotelian perfectionism with Marx's impatience; his thoughts are born from the mating of an animal and a god. The desire for truth bows before a concern for justice. »[15]

Notes:

[1] Immanuel Kant, *Fundamental Principles of The Metaphysic of Morals* (1785) (translated by Thomas Kingsmill Abbott) – *Preface*.

[2] *Id.*, *ibid*., *Third Section. Transition from The Metaphysic of Morals to The Critique of Pure Practical Reason.*

[3] Ibidem.

[4] Hegel speaks about the special relationship between society (with private rights) and State. In Marx's opinion, Hegel has *reversed the real and always dynamic* relationship between State and society, by declaring that the State is dominant, being the objective, stable, and solid reflection of the Spirit upon society. Marx accuses Hegel of 'political mysticism' and vain idealism, when he asserts that Hegel idealized the role of the State. The real relationship between society and State is empirical; actually, society itself is the establisher of the rules that determine the existence of the State. See Karl Marx, *Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie. Kritik des Hegelschen Staatsrechts*, in: Karl Marx/ Friedrich Engels - *Werke.* (Karl) Dietz Verlag, Berlin, Band 1, Berlin/DDR, 1976, p. 206: « An dieser Stelle

erscheint der logische, pantheistische Mystizismus sehr klar. Das *wirkliche* Verhältnis ist: „daß die Zuteilung des Staatsmaterials am Einzelnen durch die Umstände, die Willkür und die eigene Wahl seiner Bestimmung vermittelt ist." Diese Tatsache, dies *wirkliche Verhältnis* wird von der Spekulation als *Erscheinung*, als *Phänomen* ausgesprochen. Diese Umstände, diese Willkür, diese Wahl der Bestimmung, diese *wirkliche Vermittlung* sind bloß die *Erscheinung einer Vermittlung*, welche die wirkliche Idee mit sich selbst vornimmt und welche hinter der Gardine vorgeht. Die Wirklichkeit wird nicht als sie selbst, sondern als eine andere Wirklichkeit ausgesprochen. Die gewöhnliche Empirie hat nicht ihren eigenen Geist, sondern einen fremden zum Gesetz, wogegen die wirkliche Idee nicht eine aus ihr selbst entwickelte Wirklichkeit, sondern die gewöhnliche Empirie zum Dasein hat. Die Idee wird versubjektiviert und das *wirkliche* Verhältnis von Familie und bürgerlicher Gesellschaft zum Staat wird als ihre *innere imaginäre* Tätigkeit gefaßt. Familie und bürgerliche Gesellschaft sind die Voraussetzungen des Staats; sie sind die eigentlich Tätigen; aber in der Spekulation wird es umgekehrt. Wenn aber die Idee versubjektiviert wird, werden hier die wirklichen Subjekte, bürgerliche Gesellschaft, Familie, Umstände, Willkür etc. zu *unwirklichen*, anderes bedeutenden, objektiven Momenten der Idee. »

[5] Karl Marx/ Friedrich Engels - *Werke.* (Karl) Dietz Verlag, Berlin, Band 3, Berlin/DDR, 1976, p. 6: « Das menschliche Wesen ist kein dem einzelnen Individuum inwohnendes Abstraktum. In seiner Wirklichkeit, ist es das ensemble der geselschaftlichen Verhältnisse. »

[6] Lucien Sève, *Marxisme et théorie de la personnalité*, Paris, Éditions Sociales, 1969, p. 91.

[7] I use here the terms *transcendent* and *secularisation* in a special way, as including the presence of a superior human nature, which is ethically attainable. In this argument, I include the threefold image of a traditional ethical scheme, following Alasdair MacIntyre's theory as explained in his most famous work, *After Virtue*. MacIntyre sees ethics as strictly related *not* primarily to a transcendent nature of God – (which is, in fact, only the Christian theological explanation of man), but to a transcendent image of human nature – that which is possibly attainable. His argument is closely related to Aristotle's view on human ethics – Aristotle himself separates the divine happiness of gods from the happiness acquired by the means of human virtue; that is why the theory of virtues plays a crucial role in Aristotle's view. See Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, I, 1, 5, 1214 a 22 ff.: « Or does happiness come in none of these ways (i.e. nature or habit), but either by a sort of elevation of mind inspired by some divine power, as in the case of persons possessed by a nymph or a god, or, alternatively, by fortune? For many people identify happiness with good fortune (…) Having then in regard to this subject established that everybody able to live according to his own purposive choice (*kata ten autou proairesin*) should set before him some object for noble living to aim at (…) it is therefore more necessary to decide within oneself, neither hastily nor carelessly, in which of the things that belong to us the good life consists, and what are the indispensable conditions for men's possessing it. » (in: Aristotle, *Athenian Constitution*. *Eudemian Ethics. Virtues and Vices*, Loeb Classical Library, Harvard Mass., 1994, p. 201-203, translated by H. Rackham). The concept of deliberative choice in Aristotle (*proairesis*) is very close to Kant's transcendental view on moral.

[8] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, Second edition (University of Notre Dame Press: South Bend, IN, 1984).

[9] See: Alasdair MacIntyre, *Marxism and Christianity* [1968] (London: Duckworth, 1995).

[10] See: Emile Perreau-Saussine, *Alasdair MacIntyre between Aristotle and Marx* (*Translated from the French by Stephane Douard and Jonathan Hand*) – www.src.uchicago.edu/politicaltheory/saussine99.pdf

[11] *Id.*, *ibid.*

[12] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, Second edition (University of Notre Dame Press: South Bend, IN, 1984), p. 183.

[13] Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche and "Hitler,"* in: *The Southern Journal of Philosophy (1999), vol. XXXVII, Supplement "Nietzsche and Politics,"* p. 2.

[14] *Id.*, *ibid.*, p. 6.

[15] Emile Perreau-Saussine, *Alasdair MacIntyre between Aristotle and Marx* (*Translated from the French by Stephane Douard and Jonathan Hand*) – www.src.uchicago.edu/politicaltheory/saussine99.pdf.