REALISM, DEMOCRATIC ACCOUNTABILITY, AND NEO-ARISTOTELIANISM: READING MACINTYRE AS A POLITICAL REALIST

Caleb Bernacchio[*]

Summary: *1. Introduction. 2. MacIntyre and the Politics of the Common Good. 3. Democratic Accountability. 4. Reading MacIntyre as a Realist. 5. Conclusion.*

> A very important reason for thinking in terms of the political is that a political decision – the conclusion of a political deliberation which brings all sorts of considerations, considerations of principle along with others, to one focus of decision – is that such a decision does not in itself announce that the other party was morally wrong or, indeed, wrong at all. What it immediately announces is that they have lost.[1]
>
> Bernard Williams

1. Introduction

There is a widespread recognition that Alasdair MacIntyre has a made an important contribution to political theory. Consider, for example, the inclusion of an article about *After Virtue* in *The Oxford Handbook of Classics in Contemporary Political Theory* edited by Jacob Levy.[2] But arguably, his criticisms of liberalism have garnered much greater attention than his positive political proposals, what he terms, "the politics of the common good".[3] In Aristotelian fashion, MacIntyre links his theory of the virtues with a local, participatory democratic politics focused on realizing the common good of respective

* cbernacchio@fordham.edu, Fordham University, 113 W 60th Street, New York, NY 10023, USA.

[1] B. Williams, *Realism and Moralism in Political Theory*, in G. Hawthorn (ed.), *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2005, pp. 1-17.

[2] A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, in J. Levy (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Classics in Contemporary Political Theory*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2016, DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198717133.013.52. Hereafter referred to as *AV*.

[3] A. MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame IN 2016. Hereafter referred to as *ECM*.

communities and engaging with institutional structures in order to attain the conditions necessary for human flourishing. But worse than obscurity, MacIntyre's efforts to link virtue ethics with political theory may contribute to the misconception that his approach to politics is a form of moralism, that is, an unrealistic and exaggerated view of the role of moral notions in ordinary persons' political actions.

Political realists, most prominently Bernard Williams and Raymond Geuss, have offered forceful criticisms of liberal political theory in these terms, arguing that its focus on abstract principles of justice, amounts to "a kind of moralized preaching and an associated assumption about the causal efficacy and cognitive significance of making moral judgments".[4] Not only does MacIntyre avoid moralism, but his neo-Aristotelian theory of politics was developed, in large part, as a response to the limitations of "abstract moralism",[5] which, he argues, involves a failure to account for the motivations behind ordinary persons' political actions. Thus, MacIntyre's politics of the common good, can be understood as a distinctive form of political realism,[6] distinctive because it both eschews appeal to abstract moral norms and views the virtues as playing an essential role in political action. MacIntyre reconciles these commitments by identifying the social relations wherein the virtues are generated and explaining how they facilitate political action.

To better understand MacIntyre's neo-Aristotelian political theory, I contrast his approach, first, with Jeremy Waldron's account of *democratic accountability*.[7] Although Waldron shares a broadly Kantian perspective,[8] which has been the target of realist criticism, his efforts to understand how political institutions can be made accountable to the interests of ordinary persons, in the context of moral conflict, shares a central concern animating MacIntyre's theory of politics. But where Waldron proposes a norm of democratic accountability, a norm that can be viewed as a form of moralism, MacIntyre argues that the pursuit of common goods within practices, develops virtues that facilitate political action aimed at making institutions accountable, thereby

---

[4] R. Geuss, *Realism and the Relativity of Judgment*, in *Reality and Its Dreams*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 2016, p. 26; Id., *Philosophy and Real Politics*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2008; B. Williams, *Realism and Moralism in Political Theory*, cit.

[5] A. MacIntyre, *Marxism of the Will*, in *Against the Self-images of the Age*, Notre Dame University Press, Notre Dame IN 1978, p. 74.

[6] J. Horton, *What Might it Mean for Political Theory to Be More 'Realistic'?*, «Philosophia», 45 (2017), pp. 478-501.

[7] Id., *Accountability and Insolence*, in *Political Theory*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 2016, pp. 167-194.

[8] Id., *Kant's Legal Positivism*, «Harvard Law Review», 109/7 (1996), pp. 1535-1566; R. Stacey, *Democratic Jurisprudence and Judicial Review: Waldron's Contribution to Political Positivism*, «Oxford Journal of Legal Studies Theory», 30/4 (2010), pp. 749-773.

giving a large role to democratic accountability without falling into moralism. Following this, I draw upon Raymond Geuss' account of political realism[9] to argue that MacIntyre's politics of the common good, represents a distinct form of realism, what I term *virtue realism*, which gives a broad scope to moral agency and democratic accountability, while avoiding appeals to abstract moral principles.

2. MacIntyre and the Politics of the Common Good

Despite his commitment to a form of political realism, MacIntyre's Thomist approach to politics, which can be called a "politics of the common good",[10] can only be appreciated in the light of his neo-Aristotelian theory of the virtues. Somewhat paradoxically, it was his critique of modern moral theory, which lead him both to neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics and a related form of political realism. Without recounting these criticisms at length here, *After Virtue* presents a series of arguments against the "Enlightenment Project", that is, the project of providing a secular, rational foundation for morality that eschews appeal to a teleological notion of human nature.[11] After arguing against major variants of modern moral theory, i.e., intuitionism, Kantian deontology, utilitarianism, etc., MacIntyre argues that morality can only be understood by appeal to a notion of a *telos*, an end which provides a normative standard for human actions. Aristotelianism offers, MacIntyre argues, the most plausible version of teleology, providing a functional view of human nature,[12] which can be spelled out in terms of the social practices wherein human nature is realized. Subsequently, MacIntyre drew upon Aquinas to provide the metaphysical underpinnings of this account,[13] explaining the way that truth is attained through historical inquiry.

From this perspective, the virtues facilitate cooperative activities and deliberation within local political communities aiming to achieve a common good. The core concept of MacIntyre's moral sociology, his account of the social relations wherein the virtues have an essential role, is the concept of a *practice*. Practices are 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.[14]

---

[9] R. Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics*, cit.   [10] *ECM*, p. 178.
[11] *AV*, p. 36.   [12] *Ibidem*, p. 58.   [13] *Ibidem*, p. xi.   [14] *AV*, p. 187.

Practices include any number of activities, ranging from productive activities like fishing, farming, and some forms of automobile production[15] to the arts and sciences, as well as games such as chess, and sports like cricket and baseball. Activities such as creating a familial household, as well as local deliberative politics are also considered practices.[16] Practices and local communities provide the specific content of agents' *telos*, they specify what human flourishing and the common good amount to within the contours of an agent's life in some particular historical context.[17] Agents live well by participating in practices and engaging in deliberation within local political communities pursuing common goods. Likewise, this focus on participation, deliberation, and local political practices gives MacIntyre's politics a strongly democratic focus.

But MacIntyre also maintains that a social teleology, an account of the manner in which human flourishing is achieved within practices and local communities, while essential, is insufficient to fully account for the necessity of the virtues, and thereby, to offer a rationale for virtue ethics as an ethical theory capable of overcoming the limitation of modern moral theories.[18] In large part, MacIntyre turns to Aquinas's account of human nature and agency, for "a metaphysical grounding",[19] of his social teleology. What Aquinas's account demonstrates is that a "good life is one in which an agent" leaves "her or himself open to a final good beyond all such [particular] goods, as good desirable beyond all such goods".[20] That is, according to Aquinas, human agency is directed toward a final end that transcends each of the particular goods encountered during the course of life, a final end that human beings can attain only by properly using particular goods. As MacIntyre says,

[I]n acting for the sake of achieving some particular good, we also act for the sake of achieving our final end, and it is this that, if we act rightly, gives our lives a directedness toward that [final] end.[21]

Thus, within practices, communities, traditions and moral truth is attained within history, as participants gain a greater sense of those goods that actually contribute to human flourishing.

And like his commitment to neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, a Thomist account of human nature, and his focus on democratic political practices, MacIntyre's distinctive approach to political realism develops as a response to

---

[15] *ECM*, p. 130.   [16] *AV*, p. 227.

[17] *AV*, p. xi; A. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues*, Open Court, Chicago 1999. Hereafter referred to as *DRA*.

[18] *AV*, p. xi: "It is only because human beings have an end towards which they are directed by reason of their specific nature, that practices, traditions, and the like are able to function as they do".   [19] *Ibidem*.   [20] *ECM*, p. 231.

[21] *Ibidem*, p. 229.

modern moral theory. This is especially evident in his criticisms of various Marxian theorists, who drew upon modern moral notions in an effort to explain the motives of revolutionary agents, that is, the formation of a revolutionary consciousness.[22] This problem stems from the fact that "Marx himself never raises explicitly the question of the motives of those who seek to achieve socialism".[23] Drawing upon Kantian moral theory, Che Guevara offers a prominent example of a Marxian account that devolves into a form of moralism. "Che's moralism", MacIntyre argues, stems from "his attempt to transcend the material environment",[24] that is, to give an account of revolutionary consciousness without explaining how social conditions enable agents to develop this self-conception. Thus, MacIntyre argues, Che's account of the purity of intentions and the conscientiousness of would-be revolutionaries is "just that abstract moralism which Marx himself ought to have taught us to suspect". In this sense, MacIntyre's later account of virtues, practices, and the politics of the common good can be seen as a response to the limitations of moralism, and as an attempt to articulate a theory of politics that explains how social practices generate moral motivation, thereby facilitating political action.[25]

In his "Theses on Feuerbach", MacIntyre reinforces this connection saying that capitalist economic structures have often functioned "to deprive workers of those forms of practice through which they can discover conceptions of a good and of virtues adequate to the moral needs of resistance",[26] thereby further underscoring the failure of Marxism to explain how plain persons can become motivated to engage in political action. By contrast, MacIntyre's aims to explain how ordinary persons develop the capacity to engage in political action, through the pursuit of common goods and adherence to shared standards of excellence within social practices. Thus, by combining neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics and a rejection of abstract moralism, MacIntyre offers a distinct approach to political realism, giving much greater importance to the role of morality in facilitating political agency than other prominent realists, but avoiding appeals to abstract moral principles that ignore social context, as do prominent liberal and Marxian theorists.

3. Democratic Accountability

According to MacIntyre, in the first instance, politics is a type of practice, a collective activity where participants determine their own ends and the

---

[22] *Ibidem,* p. 261: "Marxism", MacIntyre argues lacks "a morally distinctive standpoint", that is, when "Marxists have had to take explicit moral stances", they "have always fallen back into relatively straightforward versions of Kantianism or utilitarianism".

[23] *Ibidem*, p. 74.   [24] A. MacIntyre, *Marxism of The Will*, cit., p. 74.

[25] *Ibidem*.

[26] A. MacIntyre, *The Theses on Feuerbach: A Road not Taken*, in K. Knight (ed.), *The MacIntyre Reader,* University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame in 1998, p. 232.

standards appropriate to the achievement of those ends, a practice that must be distinguished from any particular institutional embodiments.[27] It is this notion of politics as a practice, where ends are determined by participants, which makes the comparison with Waldron's notion of democratic accountability especially salient. Like Rawls, Waldron's work is similarly motivated by a broadly Kantian perspective, which has been the target of realist criticism.[28] But in contrast to Rawls, Waldron, arguably, places much greater significance on the facts of moral disagreement.[29] Where Rawls relies upon the notion of an overlapping consensus, an assumed convergence between comprehensive doctrines concerning the principles of justice, Waldron argues that the fact of moral disagreement is more far reaching, threatening the law's legitimacy.

Waldron argues that moral realism, i.e., the facts, if any exist, about relevant moral norms, is irrelevant to political theory because citizens neither agree about such facts nor agree about how moral norms can be known.[30] For Waldron, this claim forms the basis of a normative argument for legal positivism: Given widespread disagreement concerning morals and moral epistemology, law should not be grounded in (putative) moral principles. But legal positivism also gives rises to a problem concerning the law's legitimacy, since citizens are likely to disagree about the moral rectitude of legal pronouncements. In such a case, what reason do citizens have for recognizing the law's legitimacy? In response, Waldron appeals to the notion of democratic accountability, arguing that law, and political institutions more generally, are legitimate to the extent that they respect the autonomy of citizens, allowing them to participate in the democratic process whereby law is determined, and to hold political authorities accountable to the public interest.

Waldron's introduces the notion of democratic accountability by arguing that it must be understood in terms of the relationship between the *demos* and the political authorities, a relationship that he likens to that between a principle and her agent. This type of accountability, termed *agent accountability*,

denotes the duty owed by an agent to his principal, whereby the principal may demand from the agent an account of the work that the agent has been doing in the principal's name or on the principal's behalf, enabling the principal if she sees fit to sanction or replace the agent or terminate the agency relationship.[31]

The principle-agent relationship differs from that between a trustee and beneficiary because in the former the agent's sole *raison d'être* is to serve the inter-

---

[27] *AV*, p. 194.   [28] J. WALDRON, *Kant's Legal Positivism*, cit.
[29] R. STACEY, *Democratic Jurisprudence and Judicial Review*, cit.
[30] J. WALDRON, *Moral Truth and Judicial Review*, «American Journal of Jurisprudence», 43/1 (1998), pp. 75-97; G. SIGALET, *Waldron's Challenge to Aristotelians: On the Political Relevance of Moral Realism*, «Politics & Poetics», 4/4 (2018), pp. 1-23.
[31] J. WALDRON, *Accountability and Insolence*, cit., p. 168.

ests of the principle. By contrast, the trustee's service to the beneficiary is indirect, following upon her performance of the duties constitutive of the trust.

This points to a second aspect of Waldron's account. In the performance of her duties, the trustee faces a form of *forensic accountability*, where her performance is evaluated "on the basis of some established norm", namely the norms defining the nature of the trust.[32] This contrasts with the principle-agent relationship, where the principle is solely responsible for determining the norms by which to evaluate the performance of her agent, as, Waldron argues, should be the case in the relationship between the *demos* and the political authorities. A third aspect of Waldron's account is also relevant. He proposes a "multifaceted" notion of democratic accountability that ranges from individual rights claims to the demands of the people as a whole, for example in national elections and encompasses "many layers of partial collectives; interest groups; factions; the inhabitants of provinces, states, and regions; and members of various corporate entities".[33] These associations "act as mediators and facilitators of government accountability to individuals or to small groups considered on their own account".[34]

These three aspects of democratic accountability relate closely to the fundamental concerns animating MacIntyre's political theory. With his focus on local practices, MacIntyre parallels Waldron's[35] identification of the "many layers of partial collectives", as the variegated loci of democratic accountability. According to MacIntyre,[36] politics within such collectives should firstly be understood as a type practice, and only secondarily as a set of political institutions or governing structures. Political practices depend upon institutions for their preservation, especially for access to needed resources, but are also threatened by such institutions when they impose norms and values that conflict with the common goods of practices.[37] As MacIntyre says,

[S]o intimate is the relationship of practices to institutions... that institutions and practices characteristically form a single causal order in which the ideals and the creativity of the practice are always vulnerable to the acquisitiveness of the institution, in which the cooperative care for common goods of the practice is always vulnerable to the competitiveness of the institution.[38]

Thus, the need to subordinate the norms of institutions to the common goods of practices is not an external moral demand, i.e., a condition for the legitimacy of political institutions, but a structural feature of the relationship between these social structures. When political institutions exercise coercive authority, they affect, often negatively, the pursuit of common goods within specific practices, generating both the demand that institutions be responsive to those

---

[32] *Ibidem*, p. 167.   [33] *Ibidem*, p. 181.   [34] *Ibidem*.   [35] *Ibidem*.
[36] *AV*, p. 227.   [37] *Ibidem*, p. 194.   [38] *AV*, p. 194.

common goods, and collective action to change existing institutional structures.[39] In this sense, democratic accountability is primarily an aim of practice members when they encounter coercive political power, generated by the latter's impingement on the former's pursuit of individual and common goods within locally delineated practices. Similarly, for MacIntyre, the accountability required by such collective forms of political practice can only be determined by participants in various practices; it cannot be, in Waldron's[40] terms, merely forensic accountability, beholden to some predetermined norms or laws. This dynamic, between political practices and political institutions defines the fundamental problem of politics, where structural differences of power are both ineliminable and necessary for the pursuit of individual and common goods over time, since practices cannot exist without institutions, and institutions cannot exist without practices.[41]

By contrast, Waldron's notion of democratic accountability is arguably a form of moralism,[42] since he aims to identify "normative obligations on the part of the agent", that is, normative requirements incumbent upon political authorities within democratic regimes,[43] sufficient to preserve the legitimacy of political institutions. But this normative requirement must be conceived merely as a regulative requirement since, as Dunn argues, while accountability may lessen the "intrinsic humiliations" and set "some hazy limits to the harms" that rulers "will voluntarily choose to do to us collectively", it cannot be conceived as "an alternative to being ruled".[44] That is, democratic accountability, conceived as a normative requirement falling upon the political authorities, cannot eliminate the inherent differences in power between ruler and ruled, making democratic accountability an abstract moral demand that can never be fully implemented. Waldron says,

[A] social and political order is illegitimate unless it is rooted in the consent of all those who have to live under it; the consent or agreement of these people is a condition of its being morally permissible to enforce that order against them.[45]

But, precisely because political institutions, of their nature as authoritative and coercive, are not fully accountable to those they govern, democratic ac-

---

[39] A. MacIntyre, *How Aristotelianism Can Become Revolutionary*, in P. Blackledge and K. Knight (eds.), *Virtue and Politics*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame in 2011, p. 12.   [40] J. Waldron, *Accountability and Insolence*, cit.

[41] *AV*; G. Moore, *Virtue at Work*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017.

[42] S. Bagg, *What Makes a Political Theory Political? A Comment on Waldron*, «Political Studies Review», 16/3 (2018), pp. 184-191.   [43] *Ibidem*, p. 173.

[44] J. Dunn, *Situating Democratic Political Accountability*, in A. Przeworski, S. Stokes and B. Manin (eds.), *Democracy, Accountability, and Representation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1999, p. 342.

[45] J. Waldron, *Theoretical Foundations of Liberalism*, «Philosophical Quarterly», 37/147 (1986), p. 140.

countability is not a constitutive norm delimiting the field of the political, or a basic requirement of legitimacy, inherent within political practice.[46]

Despite the similarity between his practice-based approach to politics and Waldron's notion of democratic accountability, MacIntyre would ultimately agree with Dunn's conclusion: "To suggest that we can ever hope to have the power to make them [the political authorities] act just as we would wish them to suggests that it is really we, not they, who are ruling".[47] In other words, to think of democratic accountability as a norm that would ideally be followed by political authorities, is to fail to appreciate the distinction between political practices and political institutions and, thus, to completely overlook the fundamental problems of politics. For MacIntyre, democratic accountability is not firstly a condition of legitimate political institutions – whose coercive power remains effective even when exercised unaccountably – so much as a fundamental political aim generated by those same institutions when they disrupt ordinary persons' pursuit of individual and common goods within specific, locally delineated political practices.

4. Reading MacIntyre as a Realist

Political realism involves the rejection of modes of political theorizing that view politics as a form of applied ethics, where "pre-political" ethical commitments are seen as defining the field of political agency or delimiting its scope, describing this as political moralism.[48] In contrast, realists maintain that political theory must begin in an understanding of the "the practice of politics itself".[49] Along with the rejection of moralism, this focus on the practice of politics is a key point of intersection with MacIntyre's neo-Aristotelian political theory.

One of the most influential accounts of political realism comes from Bernard Williams. In a number of essays, posthumously published as *In the Beginning Was the Deed*,[50] Williams offers both a realist critique of Kantian, liberal political philosophy, especially the work of John Rawls, whom Williams viewed as a quintessential moralist, and a constructive statement of realist political theory. Unlike other prominent realists, for instance, Raymond Geuss, Williams remained committed to a form of liberalism, despite his rejection of moralism. It is not difficult to find similarities between Williams' critique of Kantian political philosophy, and MacIntyre's. Both reject the overarching role

---

[46] M. SLEAT, *Bernard Williams and the Possibility of a Realist Political Theory*, «European Journal of Political Theory», 9/4 (2010), pp. 485-503.

[47] J. DUNN, *Situating Democratic Political Accountability*, cit., p. 343.

[48] E. ROSSI and M. SLEAT, *Realism in Normative Political Theory*, «Philosophy Compass», 9/10 (2014), p. 689.   [49] *Ibidem*, p. 690.

[50] B. WILLIAMS, *In the Beginning Was the Deed*, cit.

of consensus within liberalism, the notion that politics can only begin after agreement on fundamental principles. For Williams, liberalism's prioritizing of consensus obscures the role of political practices in coping with conflict.[51] And according to MacIntyre, the conflict within contemporary society is especially apparent in the relationship between practices and institutions, where differing conceptions of the relevant goods at stake in specific social contexts drive political action.

But MacIntyre and Williams diverge concerning their respective constructive political theories. At the center of Williams' account is the Basic Legitimation Demand (BLD).[52] This is the notion that any coercive political measure must meet a fundamental requirement of legitimacy. That is, those subject to coercion must be able to distinguish between legitimate political power and violence. Williams understands the BLD in Hobbesian terms as the answer to the "'first' political question…" concerning the manner of securing "order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation".[53] Accordingly, meeting the BLD means offering an acceptable account – inevitably local and historically situated – of why subjects of the state's coercive measures are in a better position than mere enemies of the state, that is, are, in a relevant sense, rightfully subject to coercion.[54] Satisfaction of the BLD does not imply optimal political arrangements but merely that the use of coercive measures needed to secure peace is sufficiently warranted such that subjects have reason not revolt.[55]

But Williams' account of the BLD is arguably susceptible to the same type of criticisms that he directs toward Rawls, and other Kantian liberals:[56] that is, the notion of a *summum malum* is a "pre-political", ethical commitment that provides "constraints on what politics can rightfully do".[57] While more modest than Kantian accounts, Williams posits a set of fundamental concerns involving safety and public order, and argues that politics is firstly concerned with addressing such concerns. And, thus, Williams' account amounts to a form of moralism, where politics is seen as beholden to, and limited by, such "pre-political" concerns.

MacIntyre can be understood as offering a broadly Aristotelian alternative to the Hobbesianism of Williams's account and other approaches focusing on

---

[51] M. Sleat, *Bernard Williams and the Possibility of a Realist Political Theory*, cit.

[52] B. Williams, *Realism and Moralism in Political Theory*, cit., p. 4.

[53] *Ibidem*, p. 3; E. Hall, *Contingency, Confidence, and Liberalism in the Political Thought of Bernard Williams*, «Social Theory and Practice», 4/4 (2014), pp. 545-569.

[54] B. Williams, *Conflicts of Liberty and Equality,* in G. Hawthorn (ed.), *In the Beginning Was the Deed*, cit., pp. 115-127.

[55] J. Horton, *Realism, Liberal Moralism and a Political Theory of Modus Vivendi*, «European Journal of Political Theory», 9/4 (2010), pp. 431-448.

[56] M. Sleat, *Bernard Williams and the Possibility of a Realist Political Theory*, cit.

[57] B. Williams, *Realism and Moralism in Political Theory*, cit., p. 2.

the *summum malum*.[58] Paradoxically, MacIntyre avoids this type of moralism by highlighting the ineliminable importance of the plain persons' conception of the good. In other words, it is not the role of the moral theorist to determine which goods are most salient politically, instead this must be answered within specific contexts by ordinary persons engaged in political practices. Likewise, MacIntyre avoids positing either a consensus among plain persons or a primary focus on peace, security, and avoiding the *summum malum*, more generally. Instead, his account is focused on the way that conceptions of the good, generated by ordinary persons within particular social contexts, promote political action and drive conflict between such collectives and existing institutional structures.[59] Failing to account for the role of plain persons' conceptions of the good risks obscuring the extent to which political practice extends beyond or even ignores questions of peace and security.[60] As MacIntyre says, from a Thomist perspective

lives cut short by inopportune and untimely deaths are not thereby imperfect. What matters is what the agent was open to at the time of her or his death, not the perhaps great, but finite goods of which the agent was deprived by that death.[61]

In other words, some goods are more important than security, or life itself, a view that is clearly shared by many ordinary persons, who have sacrificed health, safety, or security for various ideals.

In addition to focusing on the role of conceptions of the good within various political practices and communities, MacIntyre also avoids positing any sort of consensus as the basis of legitimacy within contemporary politics. Instead, he focuses on the conflict between practices and institutions and the diverse modes of legitimation that these differing social structures draw upon.[62] Appealing to a broadly Weberian perspective, MacIntyre argues that in modernity institutions – both public and private forms of bureaucracy – typically appeal to some form of effectiveness to legitimate their activities, what he calls "bureaucratic rationality".[63] By contrast, practices and communities of various sorts, whether they be situated in some specific locale or organiza-

---

[58] *Ibidem*; J. Horton, *Realism, Liberal Moralism and a Political Theory of Modus Vivendi*, cit.; C. Burelli, *A Realistic Conception of Politics, Conflict, Order, and Political Realism*, «Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy», (2019), pp. 1-23; J. Shklar, *The Liberalism of Fear in N.L. Rosenblum*, in Id. (ed.), *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 1989, pp. 21-37.   [59] *ECM*, chapter 4.

[60] J. Horton, *Realism, Liberal Moralism and a Political Theory of Modus Vivendi*, cit., p. 438, acknowledges this point but fails to explain how concerns for peace relate to other political concerns: "The special place of the goods of peace and security in the political process does not mean that for everyone these will always and everywhere be the supreme good, necessarily overriding all other goods. People can, and sometimes will, have goals that they set above such goods".   [61] *ECM*, p. 231.   [62] *AV*.

[63] *Ibidem*, p. 74.

tion, or focused on specific issues,[64] tend to appeal to their history or tradition for legitimation.[65] In this way, MacIntyre's account of legitimacy is more realist than that of Williams[66] since he avoids imputing a set of motives, specifically concerns for peace or security, as fundamental or more basic than other sources of political action.

Thus, where MacIntyre's thought intersects with Williams' realism is especially in their shared opposition to Rawls and the Kantian tradition of political philosophy,[67] especially its focus on ideal theory. Not only does MacIntyre[68] take the arguments of the Kantian tradition of political philosophy to fail on philosophical grounds, but he also argues that they lack an adequate appreciation of the locus of politics in the interests, concerns, and activity of plain persons.[69] In the remainder of this section, I draw upon Raymond Geuss's characterization of political realism.[70] Geuss's realism provides for a better comparison with MacIntyre's political theory because both reject liberalism. Likewise, Geuss's approach was developed through an engagement with critical theory, and like MacIntyre, he views political theory as inherently critical, an effort to overcome distorting ideologies that frustrate political agents.[71] Thus, I briefly outline three elements of Geuss's realist theory of politics, among which are the notions of comparative assessment, the importance of identifying beneficiaries of existing political arrangements, and the role of legitimacy in facilitating political power. I then argue that each of these aspects of a realist theory of politics play a central role in MacIntyre's understanding of politics and the nature of political theory.

Rejecting political moralism, Geuss introduces his realist approach by identifying three questions that, he argues, consistently characterize the political. Rather than an "antecedent ontological specification of a distinct domain called *politics*",[72] these questions identify recurring concerns of political actors that consistently shape the field of political action. The first question – "Who whom?" – derives from Lenin. Rephrased as, "Who 'does' what to whom for

---

[64] A. MacIntyre, *DRA*; *ECM*; *Review* of R. Geuss, *Outside Ethics*, «Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews», (2006).

[65] MacIntyre agrees with Weber concerning the diversity of modes of legitimation but reconceptualizes the notion of tradition as an historical bearer of rationality that is superior to ahistorical conceptions of rationality typical of modern moral and political theory. See A. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame in 1988; compare R. Brandom, *A Spirit of Trust: A Reading of Hegel's Phenomenology*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge ma 2019.

[66] B. Williams, *Realism and Moralism in Political Theory*, cit.

[67] R. Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics*, cit., p. 70.   [68] *AV*, chapter 17.

[69] *ECM*, chapter 3.   [70] R. Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics*, cit.

[71] J. Prinz, *Raymond Geuss' Radicalization of Realism in Political Theory*, «Philosophy and Social Criticism», 42/8 (2016), pp. 777-796.

[72] R. Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics*, cit., p. 23.

whose benefit?"[73] – this question identifies four variables[74] delineating the network of power relationships constitutive of the political. This question radically shifts the focus of political theory from the consideration of abstract concerns with justice to concrete issues concerning power, agency, and the interests of powerful political actors. But like the demand for democratic accountability, a focus on power and interests follows directly from MacIntyre's conception of politics.

For MacIntyre politics centers upon

the relationships between practices and institutions, on the types of practice in which a kind of learning goes on that enables us to identify and pursue individual and common goods, and on the ways in which institutions that provide the social framework for practices may sustain and reinforce that learning, but may also undermine, subvert, and corrupt it.[75]

On one hand, political practices generate power by promoting moral development and commitment to common goods, thereby facilitating collective action, and enabling community members to challenge existing institutional structures.[76] On the other, political practices, and political engagement for the sake of common goods, inevitably encounters various forms of resistance, i.e., "the resistance of the established order, of the representatives of the established patterns of power",[77] in the form of various institutions with the power to disrupt local political practices. Thus, despite his focus on the role of the virtues within specific communities,[78] MacIntyre's politics is far from any sort of moralism that ignores political power, rather institutional power shapes the way that political practices function, and practices, by inculcating virtues and developing notions of the common good, generate the capacity to resist unjust institutional structures.

MacIntyre's focus on the conflict between practices and institutions dovetails with a second distinguishing mark of political realism that Geuss draws from Nietzsche. "Politics as we know it", Geuss argues, "is a matter of differential choice: opting for A *rather than* B".[79] Accordingly, politics cannot be conceived as the choice of ideal regimes or the pursuit of abstract ideals – justice, the good, rationality, etc. – "but about the pursuit of what is good in a particular concrete case" by agents facing substantial restraints and limitations.[80] Differential choice is particularly significant in relationship to the

---

[73] *Ibidem*, p. 25.

[74] *Ibidem*. The four variables are (a) who, (b) what, (c) whom, and (d) for whose benefit.

[75] A. MacIntyre, *How Aristotelianism Can Become Revolutionary*, cit., p. 12.

[76] *AV*, p. 194; *ECM*.

[77] A. MacIntyre, *How Aristotelianism Can Become Revolutionary*, cit., p. 16.

[78] *DRA*, chapter 13.   [79] R. Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics*, cit., p. 30.

[80] *Ibidem*.

previous question concerning the role of power in the context of political agency. From a realist perspective, the focus upon abstract ideals characteristic of much liberal political theory obscures the real but limited choices faced by actual political actors. For MacIntyre, the fact of political disagreement necessitates a focus on political action directed toward ameliorating existing institutional arrangements, making them more responsive to the common goods of political practice, and, as such, directed toward comparative analysis of different institutional possibilities in an effort to better facilitate the achievement of collectively determined goals.

MacIntyre[81] argues that politics "both as enquiry and as practice is concerned with the structure that government must have, if citizens are to become good human beings, good at achieving common and individual goods". But unlike moralist perspectives, MacIntyre[82] maintains that political agents must determine their own goals and conceptions of the good, within specific communities. And collective determination of goals within specific practices inevitably leads to political action within specific social and political contexts,[83] action aimed at changing existing structures such that they better facilitate, or frustrate less, the flourishing of political agents within such practices.[84] This type of conflict, involving comparative choice of institutional structures, rather than the identification of ideal political structures, defines the political sphere. Thus, rather than an attempt to identify ideal political institutions, MacIntyre argues that participants in specific political practices generate their own ideals that inevitably lead to conflict with other political actors in specific institutional contexts, making comparative choice of institutional structures essential.

MacIntyre has offered a number of practical examples of his conception of politics as a practice but what makes these examples relevant is the way that they illustrate the perennial importance of questions concerning comparative political choice. Most relevant, is a discussion of political engagement in the Monte Azul favela in São Paulo, Brazil. "Radical change in Monte Azul", argues MacIntyre, "had its small beginning in 1975 in the founding of a school dedicated to the principles of Rudolph Steiner"[85] This led to both a greater awareness of the needs of parents and children and a stronger sense of the necessity of collective action to address such needs, a process culminating in the foundation of the Associação Comunitária Monte Azul (ACOMA) in 1979.

---

[81] *ECM*, p. 178.   [82] *Ibidem*, p. 181.
[83] See *ibidem*, p. 176, "Consider how a group of individuals who have begun to think systematically about what it is for them and theirs to flourish or to fail to flourish in various areas of their lives may find themselves inescapably committed to political and economic action, just because of their concern to achieve the common goods of family, school, and workplace".   [84] *DRA*, p. 132.   [85] *ECM*, p. 180.

Through collective action organized and supported by ACOMA, residents of Monte Azul were able to ameliorate aspects of the institutional structures impacting their communal life. This amelioration included substantial improvements in sewage and the sanitation system, public safety, especially improvements in street lighting, as well expanded public provisions for education and healthcare.

This example illustrates community members' shrewd appreciation of the possibilities available within their context[86] and the ability to make comparative judgments focused on improving existing conditions rather than implementing abstract or a apriori ethical ideals.[87] MacIntyre notes that "the life of the community has been transformed not just by these improvements, but by the cooperative activities through which they were and are obtained",[88] that is, political practices that facilitated collective action. In this sense, for MacIntyre, politics is not applied ethics, but rather, ethics is a part of politics,[89] since the virtues and fundamental ethical norms are necessary conditions of cohesive communities, collective action, and mutual learning concerning individual and common goods.[90] Likewise, political action in pursuit of common goods provides a key locus of moral development. Thus, without falling into moralism, MacIntyre presents a notion of politics that is in no way amoral[91] but rather highlights the indispensable function of the virtues within political practices and collective action. This is an important point of contrast between MacIntyre and Geuss; while, the latter is careful to distinguish moralism from the making of moral judgement, he ultimately gives little role to ethics within his account of political realism.

As Geuss says, "One can, however, make moral judgments without thereby being committed to what I call *moralism*".[92] Yet he remains critical of virtue ethics, especially a "free-standing virtue ethics", divorced from "history, psychology, and social theory".[93] But ultimately, Geuss's criticism of decontex-

---

[86] M. PHILP, *Realism without Illusions*, «Political Theory», 40/5 (2010), p. 637.

[87] See R. GEUSS, *Philosophy and Real Politics*, cit., on the importance of comparative judgments in political realism.   [88] *ECM*, p. 180.   [89] *DRA*, chapter 13.

[90] *AV*, p. 191; ID., *How can we Learn what* Veritatis Splendor *has to Teach?*, «The Thomist», 58/2 (1994), pp. 171-195; *ECM*, p. 89: "The precepts of the natural law are those precepts of reason conformity to which is necessary if we and others are to be able to deliberate together as rational agents and to achieve our common goods as family members, as members of political societies, and the like".

[91] J. HORTON, *Realism, Liberal Moralism in Political Theory*, cit.; W. GALSTON, *Realism in Political Theory*, «European Journal of Political Theory», 9/4 (2010), pp. 385-411; R. GEUSS, *Realism and the Relativity of Judgment*, cit., pp. 39-40; B. Williams, *Realism and Moralism in Political Theory*, cit., p. 7.

[92] R. GEUSS, *Realism and the Relativity of Judgment*, cit., p. 25.

[93] ID., *Virtue and the Good Life*, «Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics», 8/1 (2000), p. 19.

tualized accounts of the virtue's points in the same direction as MacIntyre's criticisms of Marxist moralism.[94] And unlike many other virtue ethicists, MacIntyre's work has sought to ground an account of the virtues within an account of socially and historically embodied modes of political practice.[95] This political orientation distinguishes MacIntyre's account of the virtues from that of other prominent neo-Aristotelians, such as Foot[96] and Hursthouse.[97] Similarly, because of his focus on the way that socially and historically embodied modes of political practice both promote the development of virtues and draw upon the virtues to facilitate collective action, MacIntyre's political theory represents a unique combination of realism shorn of any skepticism concerning the fundamental role of morality in political action. In response to Geuss's call for a more contextualized account of the virtues, MacIntyre says, Geuss

never identifies those areas in our own social order within which the relationships between the virtues, friendship, and directedness towards the achievement of the human good have taken on a distinctively contemporary form.[98]

MacIntyre's work has sought to identify such contemporary loci of virtues and to explain how they drive political action.

Geuss's final question indicative of the realist approach concerns legitimacy. Geuss[99] expands upon Weber's account of legitimacy as the justification violence, viewing legitimacy as the justification of collective action, including "any arrangements that could be seen as capable of being changed, controlled, modified, or influenced by human action". As noted above, MacIntyre contrasts the modes of legitimation characteristic of practices from that characteristic of institutions. Within practices, norms and procedures are justified by appeal to notions of excellence embodied within a tradition, where conceptions of the good are seen as developing over time, through practice. By contrast, institutions typically appeal to notions of efficiency or effectiveness to justify their rules, procedures, and actions. These contrasting modes of legitimation intersect with another distinction noted in MacIntyre's work, that is, the contrast between ahistorical modes of justification characteristic of most forms of liberalism, and historically informed appeals to tradition, typical of both Thomism and of local communities on the margins of modern society. In a liberal context, notions of utility, rights, or the *summum malum* are

---

[94] A. MacIntyre, *Marxism of the Will*, cit.

[95] K. Knight, *Aristotelian Philosophy: Ethics and Politics from Aristotle to MacIntyre*, Polity, Cambridge 2007.

[96] P. Foot, *Natural Goodness,* Oxford University Press, Oxford 2001.

[97] R. Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics,* Oxford University Press, Oxford 1999.

[98] A. MacIntyre, *Review* of *Outside Ethics*, cit.

[99] R. Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics*, cit., p. 35.

often seen as ahistorical normative facts suitable to ground collective action. By contrast within local communities, appeal is made to norms and conceptions of the good that are justified by their place within a tradition.[100]

MacIntyre's concern with legitimacy – especially the modes of argument that underpin liberalism – as this notion figures within political theory, intersects closely with Geuss's account of the function of genealogy as the "study of the historical and social origins of the concepts, theories, and arguments that partly structure the discursive space of a society".[101] This is especially the case insofar as moral disagreements concerning the nature and relevance of various types of goods are partially rooted in political disagreements generated by the heterogeneity of roles, functions, and activities within the social world,[102] disagreements that both presuppose and generate differing modes of legitimation.[103] Given this type of conflict, a key task for political theory is unmasking forms of ideology that obscure unrealized opportunities for action.[104] Accordingly, *After Virtue* represents a strikingly ambitious genealogy of modernity, intended to both undermine the legitimacy of contemporary liberalism and to open a space for a more locally focused type of political engagement. MacIntyre's critique focuses on the way in which liberalism often depends upon an appeal to ahistorical and impersonal forms of rational justification, presenting its fundamental claims as self-evident.[105] Arguing that

---

[100] A. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, cit.

[101] R. Geuss, *Dystopia: The Elements*, in *Reality and its Dreams*, cit., p. 11.

[102] *AV*, p. 194.

[103] In this sense, MacIntyre agrees with Williams concerning the centrality of political disagreement, stemming from the structural differences between political practices within specific communities – organized around collectively determined goals – and institutions necessarily focusing on attaining and maintaining power. See B. Williams, *From Freedom to Liberty: The Construction of a Political Value*, in G. Hawthorn (ed.), *In the Beginning Was the Deed*, cit., p. 77; he says, "[P]olitical disagreement is not merely moral disagreement, and it need not necessarily involve it, though it may do so; equally, it need not necessarily be a disagreement simply of interests, though of course it may be".

[104] *DRA*, p. 102: "Foucault was only the latest in a long line of thinkers – Augustine, Hobbes, and Marx are his most notable predecessors – to remind us that institutionalized networks of giving and receiving are also always structures of unequal distributions of power, structures well-designed both to mask and to protect those same distributions". C. Bernacchio, *Morality Between Taboo and Ideology: Reading MacIntyre as a Post-Marxist*, «Rethinking Marxism», 32/2 (2020), pp. 207-227.

[105] *AV*, pp. 58-59: "But the use of 'man' as a functional concept 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. For according to that tradition to be a man is to fill a set of roles each of which has its own point and purpose: member of a family, citizen, soldier, philosopher, servant of God. It is only when man is thought of as an individual prior to and apart from all roles that 'man' ceases to be a functional concept". Compare R. Geuss, *The Moral Legacy of Marxism*, in *Reality and*

liberal modes of justification, far from self-evident, are rather historically limited modes of justification[106] provides a means of opening up a new space of possibilities concerning political action in modernity. MacIntyre's later works have sought to outline these new possibilities for political engagement in greater detail,[107] in each case, focusing on the way that local communities embody conceptions of the good and modes of practice that promote moral development, and provide a distinct source of legitimation for political action.

5. Conclusion

In this article, I have sought to outline some of the contours of Alasdair MacIntyre's approach to politics. To do this, I have related his approach to Waldron's[108] notion of democratic accountability and to political realism, as developed by Williams and Geuss. As I have argued, despite his focus on the role of the virtues MacIntyre, avoids any sort of moralism, where politics is grounded in ideal theory. Instead following Aristotle, MacIntyre elaborates a notion of ethics that is essentially a part of politics, an account of the norms and virtues required to successfully organize a community, engage in collective deliberations, and act so as to achieve common goods in the face of recalcitrant institutions. MacIntyre's distinctive neo-Aristotelian approach to politics has been partially obscured both because his most well-known work, *After Virtue*, placed greater attention on ethical questions rather than their political context and because MacIntyre's earlier discussions of politics involved stylized examples that failed to fully characterize the context of political action.[109] But MacIntyre has since developed more realistic examples of political conflict between self-determining collectives and existing institutional structures that offer insight into the role of common goods, conflict, and comparative choice in political practice.

Geuss[110] notes that because moralism "is a complex conjunction of a num-

---

its Dreams, cit., pp. 100-101: "Marx represents in a particularly striking way a completely different approach to defining the issues and proceeding. He was deeply committed to a way of seeing which is very different from the Kantian or the Rawlsian way. One does not start with "the individual and his moral powers", any more than from "the individual and his cognitive powers". Lukács, in *Geschichte und Klassenbewußtsein*, gets it right when he says that the most important thing about Marx is his view that society is a "totality" – that is, it is an entity composed of individuals-in-historically-specific-social-relations, which is oriented toward satisfying historically arising needs and reproducing itself though social action".

[106] A. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, cit., chapter XVII.
[107] *DRA*, chapter 11; *ECM*.   [108] J. Waldron, *Accountability and Insolence*, cit.
[109] A. MacIntyre, *A Partial Response to My Critics*, in J. Horton and S. Mendus (eds.), *After MacIntyre: Critical Perspectives on the Work of Alasdair MacIntyre*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame IN 1994, pp. 283-303.
[110] R. Geuss, *Realism and the Relativity of Judgement*, cit., p. 38.

ber of positions, one can reject one component of it without necessarily rejecting the others", making possible a "spectrum" or "very wide swath of nonmoralizing positions". Thus, MacIntyre's theory of politics represents a distinct form of realism – which could be termed *virtue realism* – that, unlike Williams[111] avoids appeal to a moralizing notion of the *summum malum*, while giving morality a central place in political practice. For MacIntyre,[112] we must look to Aristotle to appreciate the way that participation in shared practices generates new conceptions of common goods that drive political action. Without denying the importance of security and safety, for MacIntyre there is no bedrock set of concerns that are sufficient for the legitimacy of political institutions. Instead, political institutions will continuously gain legitimacy to the extent that they support and uphold political practices, which embody and continually give rise to robust conceptions of the good. And likewise, institutions will continuously lose legitimacy insofar as they fail to be responsive to practice members' evolving conceptions of common goods.

MacIntyre's approach to politics links with Waldron's[113] notion of democratic accountability, because for the former, politics is always a matter of how existing institutions are held accountable by plain persons engaged in political practices. But MacIntyre avoids Waldron's moralism by articulating the intrinsic link between democratic accountability and political practice. Democratic accountability is not merely a norm that political institutions *ought* to accept but firstly a function of political practices and their relationship to various institutions. In this way, MacIntyre's account has much in common with the tradition of political realism as elaborated by Geuss.[114] MacIntyre's theory of politics is centered upon concrete political practices where questions concerning, power, virtue, and agency intersect, as plain persons seek to ameliorate existing institutional arrangements, by making comparative judgments regarding the desirability and feasibility of differing institutional structures. Thus, MacIntyre's political theory can be viewed as a virtue realism, where participation in political practices is sustained by virtues, which facilitate political action and conflict with existing political institutions. As MacIntyre says, in the context of modern society, "any follower of Aquinas would exhibit virtues which are dysfunctional to the common life".[115]

ABSTRACT · MacIntyre's criticisms of liberalism are well known but his constructive political philosophy is less widely appreciated. In this article, I outline MacIntyre's neo-Aristotelian political theory by situating it in relationship to both Jeremy Waldron's

---

[111] B. WILLIAMS, *Realism and Moralism in Political Theory*, cit. [112] *ECM*.
[113] J. WALDRON, *Accountability and Insolence*, cit.
[114] R. GEUSS, *Philosophy and Real Politics*, cit.
[115] A. MACINTYRE, *Sōphrosunē: How a Virtue Can Be Socially Disruptive*, «Midwest Studies in Philosophy», XIII (1988), p. 10.

account of democratic accountability and the political realism of Bernard Williams and Raymond Geuss. MacIntyre shares Waldron's concern that political institutions be accountable to ordinary political agents but he avoids the latter's moralism by viewing democratic accountability as a structural feature of the relationship between practices and institutions. Likewise, MacIntyre's critique of liberalism has much in common with that of Williams but MacIntyre differs from Williams in rejecting the latter's view of political legitimacy as centered upon provisions of societal order and security. In contrast, MacIntyre's approach is similar to Geuss's account of political realism except that MacIntyre gives a much greater role to virtues and moral norms generated within locally delineated practices as key factors facilitating political action. In this sense, MacIntyre's theory of politics can be called a virtue realism.