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THE SHARED SEARCH FOR TRUTH
The Dialogical Approach
To The Natural Moral Law
In The Works Of Alasdair Macintyre

THESES OF THE DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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I. Background and main issues

1. The inspiration for my doctoral dissertation came from various threads of my previous research concerning the nature of ethics, truth and deception, disagreement and the possibilities of rational dialogue. It also carries on the topics of my earlier MA theses. Of these, the MA thesis in Communications submitted at the Pázmány Péter Catholic University dealt with phenomena that tend to eclipse truth: Harry Frankfurt's concept of bullshit, Daniel J. Boorstin's *image*, and Jean Baudrillard's simulacrum. The present dissertation underlines the importance of getting to truth, even if these phenomena hinder our attempts. My MA thesis in Philosophy at the same university concerned G.E. Moore, metaethics and moral epistemology. MacIntyre played a big role in that dissertation as someone who provided important criticism of Moore's intuitionism. Later on, I defended intuitionism in my thesis at the Central European University. However, intuitive beliefs (and the intuitionist approach) need to be supplemented by our learning about each other's intuitions and beliefs – my present dissertation intends to highlight this need. Meanwhile, I am sticking to the claim typically attributed to intuitionists that morality cannot be derived from non-moral facts. MacIntyre seems to be somewhat contradictory with regard to this. However, I show that in various papers, he explains how the natural moral law is not dependent on positions regarding human nature, tradition, religion, or practices – although it is connected to them. Therefore, when I argue that the norms of shared rational dialogue is at least partly constitutive of moral precepts, this is mostly because the possibility and value of moral learning makes them moral norms: failing to learn about these invites the possibility of violating moral norms; this is where the normativity of dialogues that aim at learning about moral norms comes from.
2. The theme of the present dissertation seems to be always topical, due to the factors that hinder dialogue and the challenges of relativism. Consider relativism first, as the argument against it takes a large part in my dissertation, and it is closely related to my earlier research. Relativism itself could be considered as a factor hindering dialogue: relativists can easily come to the conclusion that since all views are only valid relative to their own cultural frameworks, we cannot learn from the culture of others. However, relativism constitutes a peril for other reasons too. Nevertheless, just because someone is a relativist, she is not necessarily violent, intolerant, or 'dangerous' in her behavior. Relativism and the denial of objective truths and norms becomes dangerous when

someone's general disposition is not peaceful and tolerant, but violent and intolerant. If someone (or someone's culture's) disposition is prone to be impatient, aggressive or even violent, then the denial of universal norms itself undermines the possibility of their reform. However, if we accept a version of antirelativism according to which our view is not unquestionably true and might miss objective reality, then that requires a critical stance which urges us to check if other cultures have a better grip on reality.

3. Phenomena that hinder dialogue include, beside the ones that I have already listed (including clashing worldviews and theoretical frames), factors that could be called partly psychological, and partly political. We need shared dialogue 'in part because we need others to help us recognise significant truths – either because our abilities are limited in a given situation, or because our prejudices, biases and partialities, or even our self-deception might make learning some truths impossible – and it is hard to overcome these by ourselves alone. (These psychological factors might be approached theologically too, from the angle of 'what Aquinas says about the roots of intellectual blindness in moral error, [...] the misdirection of the intellect by the will and [...] the corruption of the will by the sin of pride, both that pride which is an inordinate desire to be superior and that pride which is an inclination to contempt God.')

Moreover, I share MacIntyre's diagnosis which says that one 'of the most striking facts about modern political orders is that they lack institutionalized forums within which these fundamental disagreements can be systematically explored and charted let alone there being any attempt made to resolve them.'² Post-truth, fake news, alternative facts, ideological bubbles and echo chambers have become well-known concepts that describe difficulties in reaching truth and in conducting meaningful social dialogue. All these factors show the importance of talking about the need for dialogue, including communal and political ones.

4. The aim of my dissertation is at least twofold. On the one hand, I intend to offer a plausible account of the natural law, and on the other hand, I intend to provide a plausible interpretation of MacIntyre. With regard to the natural law, I aim to substantiate the claim that the norms of dialogue should be seen as universal moral prescriptions – that is, precepts of natural law. The main problems concerning this issue

¹ MacIntyre, Alasdair 1990: *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press. 147.

² MacIntyre, Alasdair 1988: *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press. 2.

are questions regarding the basis of the need for dialogue, the nature and application of the norms of dialogue, and the political (ir)relevance of these norms. I consider these in different chapters of the dissertation. The conception in question comes from MacIntyre's various writings on natural law, and I try to make it plausible through analyzing, (re)interpreting, amending, and sometimes correcting his claims.

My main research question concerns the plausibility and consistency of this MacIntyrean conception. The thesis of the dissertation could be summarized by the claim that (moral and political) dialogue does successfully ground moral norms, as MacIntyre suggests – however, MacIntyre's claims as to the concrete content and applications of these norms are more questionable than the basic conception. Nevertheless, even this contestation requires dialogue, therefore these points do not put the basic conception in question – they might even reinforce it.

II. Methodology

1. MacIntyre's arguments concerning natural law are based on the conditions of rational debates and the need to provide reasons for accepting or rejecting certain judgments. He thinks that by claiming something to be true, we also commit ourselves to give reasons for its truth, and to engage in debating arguments for and against it. In order to be able to debate these arguments successfully, we need others to engage in dialogue with us who can defend opposing views in an authentic and competent way. However, their involvement cannot be successful and truthful if we threaten them physically, therefore the prohibition of threatening is one of the conditions of rational debate. MacIntyre argues for the need for rational debate in various ways, partly by pointing out that we cannot give up our claim to truth. This, according to his argument introduced above, constitutes a necessary feature of communication. I show why we need truth, why we are always implicitly committed to dialogue and debate, and why the norms of dialogue need to be obeyed partly by examining their inescapability, that is, pointing out that denying these involves either an explicit or implicit contradiction.
2. The term 'dialogical approach' means the grasping of a concept through the phenomenon of dialogue, but it could also be applied to the identification and clarification of a concept by engaging in dialogue about it. The dialogical approach with regard to the natural law means, on the one hand, that we take the norms of the natural law to be identical to the ones that we need to observe in a rational dialogue. On the

other hand, it also refers to the related fact that natural law prescribes dialogues – and that the precepts of natural law itself could be uncovered, learned, and clarified by engaging in, and reflecting on this kind of dialogue.

As with communication and our lives in general, the requirements of rational dialogue are valid for the dialogical approach itself – its description and justification. This means, first, that we should consider and discuss alternative conceptions as our possibilities allow us, second, that our results need to be presented as always open to further debate – not ones that put an end to enquiry, but ones that could be put to further questioning. I intend to satisfy these requirements by discussing points made by MacIntyre and others that could be interpreted as objections to the dialogical approach to the natural law. Furthermore, by emphasizing that the theory I elaborate needs further examination, checking, and (common) reflection.

3. I will address both apparent and substantial inconsistencies within MacIntyre's work. I have attempted to construe a unified and consistent position out of the major threads in his thought, of thoughts that he often emphasizes, or ones that he only brings up in passing. This thesis develops a coherent and plausible position based upon rather than summative of MacIntyre's work. Therefore, at many points the emphasis is on revision rather than emulation.

Moreover, his theory concerning natural law is somewhat fragmented: he never discussed it systematically, only sporadically – but at certain points in his books and in some of his papers.

So, I attempt to follow his footsteps, but also to seek out answers to questions that he has not considered.

I try to show in my dissertation that natural law and dialogue are central to MacIntyre's thought, and also try to show its general significance for everyone relying on his works, while correcting or interpreting his tendencies that point in other directions. Positioning the dialogical approach to the natural law as central to MacIntyre's theory in a way that might even eclipse some other aspects of his thought entails that at some points, there are going to be differences between my theses and MacIntyre's, let alone other interpreters of MacIntyre. At certain points, I argue that some of his arguments demand reconsideration in the light of others and that apparent inconsistencies are capable of resolution. At other points, I employ my own arguments as well as using MacIntyre's points against MacIntyre himself, arguing that some actual contradiction in his work should be resolved in a certain way, rather than in another.

III. New results

1. The interpretation of MacIntyre that I provide is far from being widespread, but at least there are a few people who interpret him in a more or less similar way. So this kind of interpretation is at least present in the anglophone literature (even if not the more complete and systematic reinterpretation that I offer in my dissertation), and at least MacIntyre's papers that I treat as paradigmatic here are available in English. Meanwhile, I do not know of interpretations of MacIntyre in Hungarian that are relevantly similar. (That is why my dissertation itself is in Hungarian.)

One of the interpretations that this thesis attempts to transcend is Jason Blakely's. He argues (in relation to the MacIntyre–Winch debate) that MacIntyre successfully countered the relativist challenge already in the 1970s with his theory concerning narratives and traditions. Against him, I argue that this particular MacIntyrean theory has not yet fully overcome relativism, and it is only the dialogical approach to natural law that finally resolves this problem in his oeuvre.

About the centrality of natural law theory in MacIntyre's thought I take the following passage to be decisive: 'we have to accord to the good of truth a place that does not allow it to be overridden by other goods.'³ Now this 'good of truth' is that which makes it both a need and an obligation that we observe the (dialogically conceived) precepts of the natural law.

2. It is interesting to see what similarities might appear between MacIntyre and other thinkers as we put more emphasis on his theory of natural law – we might see some philosophers, threads and theses as connected or perhaps separated that we have not perceived as such before. Connected to certain claims with which people usually do not connect them, or separated from ideas which are usually seem to be closely related – just because they traditionally do or do not belong to the claims of a given philosophical school. This way, MacIntyre and others might be seen in a different light, and might have to be reevaluated. One of the novelties of my dissertation in this regard is that I point out the affinities between MacIntyre and Kant in a new way.
3. The chapter concerning the importance of truth is one that shows that MacIntyre's theses require amendment. I try to give reasons why we are all interested in finding out

³ MacIntyre, Alasdair 2006: „Aquinas and the Extent of Moral Disagreement”. In *Ethics and Politics. Selected Essays Vol. 2*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press. 77.

various truths – be it truths regarding ourselves, our preferences, our situation, or ones regarding big questions that function as a background to these and similar questions. I point out that we have to take truth to be our need, our aim, and a constitutive part of our happiness, as the question of what *really* is good for us is the basis of answers to other questions concerning our needs, aims, and happiness. It is always possible that our conception of good is erroneous – this is why we need answers that are more true and more justified. Following these points, I argue that there are certain questions the answer to which might be of immense significance – such that learning them ought to be the most important thing in our lives. Now, since they have this kind of significance, even considering them (and the question regarding their truth) should have the same kind of significance. Because of this, enquiring about them should have a central role in our lives, in a way that leads to reliable answers – which in turn involves dialogue with others.

4. Peter Winch, Catherine Zuckert, and Nathan Pinkoski are the writers with whom I have an extended argument in my dissertation. Both Winch and MacIntyre have charged each other with relativism, and they both tried to come up with answers to this kind of charge. I argue in my dissertation that while Winch's attempts at downplaying the relativistic overtones of his view have eventually failed, MacIntyre succeeded in arguing against relativism (even if he managed to do this way after Blakely supposes he did so). I try to substantiate this claim by analyzing concepts of natural law that they both use to counter relativism. Winch's idea of natural law is rather barren and questionable, and he has eventually given it up – at least partly. Meanwhile, MacIntyre has put forward a defensible conception of natural law, in which precepts are determined by the rules of enquiry and dialogue. Moreover, Winch and MacIntyre both have tried to establish the normativity of truthfulness and settle the exact content of this norm. However, this norm does not seem to have any real prescriptive force in Winch's account, and he fails to settle its content due to the exceptions he allows with regard to its violation, while MacIntyre's account of truthfulness seems to be a part of the natural law as a categorical and universal precept, in which he integrates cases where we actually ought to tell lies. The criticisms of MacIntyre put forward by Zuckert and Pinkoski are concerned with his political thought. It seems that both of these criticisms cannot be correct at the same time: MacIntyre's conception cannot be both too demanding, that is, too robust – as Zuckert seems to suggest, and too apolitical, that is, too insubstantial – as Pinkoski claims. Now which of these criticisms is appropriate – if either? I argue in my

dissertation that both criticisms misfire. MacIntyre hits the right balance in his political advice by offering some conclusions in some questions and by intentionally staying silent about other questions. I try to answer the two criticisms by using the issue of tolerance and censorship as an example – partly because it plays an important role in MacIntyre’s oeuvre. I also try to show what this important role means, and – as the two topics are closely related – I discuss MacIntyre’s relationship to liberalism too. This way, I can address Pinkoski’s concerns regarding MacIntyre’s supposedly ineffective criticism of liberals. Moreover, this topic leads us to the question of how dialogue plays an essential role in MacIntyre’s political philosophy – as questions of tolerating or censoring various views gain their importance in MacIntyre’s work due to being relevant to the conditions of the dialogue that is required by the precepts of the natural law.

5. The topics in which there seems to be disagreement between the theory that I provide based on MacIntyre’s ideas and MacIntyre’s own claims include the relationship of the natural law and disciplines other than ethics, the application of natural law and the virtue of *phronesis*, and the theory of human rights. As I have addressed the first topic above (see the 1st paragraph on the background of, and the main issues raised in the dissertation), below I am only going to discuss the latter two.

The precepts of the natural law are justified in MacIntyre’s thought primarily as rules, however, in some of his works, he seems to be criticizing ethics that are based on rules. Concerning this tension, I would like to show that values, virtues, and rules are inseparable in his philosophy – they are interdependent. In MacIntyre’s eyes, rules are important too, including explicit rules – since these enable us to rethink our practices. Practical rationality, or *phronesis*, is a key virtue that helps us in applying rules. Most probably, it is itself not fully based on rule-following, nevertheless, it still needs rules that guide it, and which it can apply to various situations; while in many situations, the role of *phronesis* is minimal, as rules make clear what the right action in a given situation is.

One could easily regard everything that turns out in the chapter on MacIntyre’s politics of natural law to be permissible or tolerable in political communities simply as a human right. Couldn’t we have a natural right to participate in communal dialogue, to autonomously form opinions – and in general, to learn? In fact, MacIntyre is a fierce critique of natural or human rights, so his answer to these questions is firmly negative.

Now if these are not human rights, then how should we conceive them according to MacIntyre? And is his conception of these plausible, or should we stick to the idea of human rights? I discuss this in my dissertation partly because many authors worry that MacIntyre, being a communitarian thinker, deflates the importance of individuals and their rights. Against this kind of criticism, but actually against MacIntyre himself too, I argue that his argument for the dialogical approach of the natural law invalidates the central part of his criticism of human rights. Although MacIntyre denies the paradigmatic accounts of human rights, his reasons to do this are not convincing, and are contrary to many of his insights concerning the natural law. I believe that his arguments for the dialogical approach to natural law, with my amendments, could be considered stronger than his criticism of human rights. As with truth, we should attribute value and dignity to individuals, and we should avoid regarding them as mere instruments to enhance our rationality – which in turn requires us to attribute them human rights. This is the only way that we can show the kind of respect towards each other that provides the necessary background to rational dialogue.

6. In my dissertation, I describe truth as one of our most important goals, and dialogue as the primary way that leads to it. Nevertheless, it has to be emphasized – as MacIntyre does – that other things besides objective truth can legitimately be among our aims, and not every second of our lives has to be spent with discursive thinking. This is because it could also be objectively true (and in my opinion, it is true) that besides truth, we may have other goals, and these in turn can at least sometimes put dialogue and the application of rational thinking on the sideline – since even that can enable us to seek truth more effectively, and to engage in dialogue with others more efficiently and meaningfully. At the end of the day, even if we do not engage in these kinds of activities directly, and even if engaging in them is often difficult, we ought to live lives of rational enquiry and dialogue – struggling both with external obstacles and our own shortcomings.

IV. Publications related to the dissertation

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